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She was hate and she was horror — and the Earthman had a date with her beside the brimstone sea . . .

ENCHANTRESS OF VENUS

Novel of the Lost Ones
by *LEIGH BRACKETT*

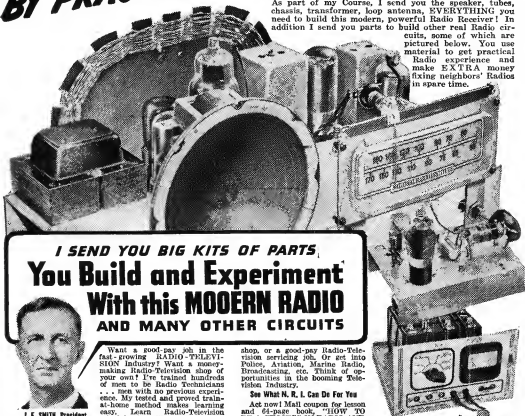


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ANOTHER SMASHING BRACKETT NOVEL ENCHANTRESS OF VENUS . . . by Leigh Brackett 4

Laughing, she cast him down into the hideous depths, beneath the seas of flaming gas, to where dead blossoms swayed, whispering, over strangely jumbled ruins. . . . But there he found the secret of her power, and came surging back—up from the depths, from the slime, the tortured swamps—to storm her forbidden temple and seek her within, death like a gift in his hand!

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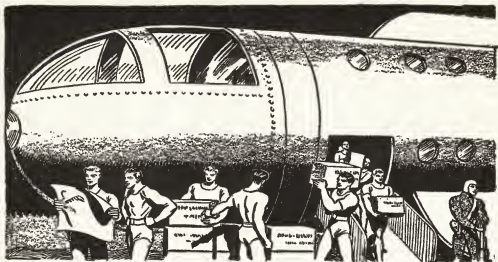
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THE VIZIGRAPH

NOW look what's happened! And all because we asked a simple little question in the last issue. We said—and we were smiling when we said it—we said, “Do youse guys and gals really want the Vizigraph, or would you rather have another story?”

The issue hit the stands March 1st. Then you hit us. First came letters—tens, hundreds, thousands—by basket and by mail-truck full. Then came telegrams. Then came phone calls—ring, ring, ring—until PS's own pet secretary went off her bazoo and began smashing the switch-board.

Then you came, a great red-eyed teeth-clenched horde, you fen with something to say and you readers who didn't want to hear it. You sat in the hall, in the office, out on the stairs, demanding to see us and glaring at each other. Tension mounted . . . pressure boiled . . . we don't know what spark set off the tinder-box—a word, a shove, something thrown—and suddenly the fair halls of PS were a shambles. Costly rugs crumpled and gouged, priceless tapestries ripped from the walls, gorgeous antique furniture smashed beyond repair, bric-a-brac pulverized—and over it all a rising tide of hideous crimson . . .

Never mind, the police have come. Plowing bravely into the mass of snarling, struggling humans, they have driven you back, back, back . . .

And we? We have crawled into our ravaged sanctum, trailing an oddly twisted leg after us through a smear of red. We raise our poor torn, bruised face with the reproachful, pain-shot eyes and speak to you—through hideously battered mouth and crumbling fragments of teeth:

Thanks for your many interesting and good-natured comments, gang. The response was most heartening. We really did get lots and lots of comments embodied in letters and postcards and even a sniff from the girl in the front office. The consensus of opinion so far, statistically, is that 51.5% favor continuing the Vizigraph, 38.2% would rather have another story, and 10.3% are more or less on the fence.

We think we have a clear majority for La Vizi. About that, we're only glad. If any of you think we wanted to stop the department, kindly note Jim Blish's letter below in which he points out that the Vizigraph actually saves money for PS. But that's far from our real angle. Frankly, we love you. You write swell letters. You do a lot for PS, and don't kid yourselves.

But there's food for sober thought in these results. There should have been more replies. And there should have been a much bigger majority. What's wrong?

Well, we want to make something very plain. PS foots the bill, but you are the department. You make it what it is. Read the opposition comments below.

We set ourselves to print the most entertaining and/or interesting letters. We run all the letters that seem to us thoughtful and earnest. We take them as they come.

Now, let's see you characters come up with something hot. Remember, every objector to the Vizigraph is a potential fan. Now get busy and sell them the department. All 38.2% of them.

Lessee, lessee . . . who wins? Oh, yeah . . . Higgins, John take three giant steps and select one pic. Dave Green, two g.s. and pick two. Liz Curtis, one g.s. and pick three. Congrats, all of you!

—PLANET'S LITTLE PUNDIT.

THE AUTHORS SPEAK UP

171 Pelton Avenue
Staten Island 10, N. Y.

DEAR PAUL:

I'd like to add my vote on the Vizigraph question. As nearly as I can figure, eliminating La Vizi would increase your yearly story budget by about 20,000 words, at 5,000 words per issue. In this connection I'd like to remind you of something which you may have overlooked. PLANET

(Continued on page 101).

"I WAS ASHAMED OF MY FACE"

until Viderm helped make my skin clearer in one short week"

(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

If your face is broken-out, if bad skin is making you miserable, here is how to stop worrying about pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS



IT DOESN'T PAY to put up with a broken-out face. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. Handsomeness and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin. Nobody likes to look at a face that is blemished by blackheads or pimples. WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, HEALTHY-LOOKING SKIN. Business executives don't choose men whose complexions are against them. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive Viderm formula may help you.

Good-looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same handsome complexion, free from externally caused skin troubles, simply by giving your face the special care that screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly purges the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—something that ordinary cleansing seldom does. In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser. This penetrates the pores and acts as an anti-septic. Specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out. They dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin

entirely free of the dirt particles that usually bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

Squeezing pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Doing so may also be injurious and leave your face with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to get it smoother and clearer and to keep it that way. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated medicated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears,

leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen

to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident of a smoother and clearer complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment. Then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smoother, clearer skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. U, New York City 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and mailed in a plain wrapper. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm Treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clear, blemish-free complexion.





Enchantress Of Venus

By LEIGH BRACKETT

THE SHIP MOVED SLOWLY across the Red Sea, through the shrouding veils of mist, her sail barely filled by the languid thrust of the wind. Her hull, of a thin light metal, floated without sound, the surface of the strange ocean parting before her prow in silent rippling streamers of flame.

Night deepened toward the ship, a river of indigo flowing out of the west. The man known as Stark stood alone by the after rail and watched its coming. He was full of impatience and a gathering sense of danger, so that it seemed to him that even the hot wind smelled of it.

The steersman lay drowsily over his sweep. He was a big man, with skin and hair the color of milk. He did not speak, but Stark felt that now and again the man's eyes turned toward him, pale and

calculating under half-closed lids, with a secret avarice.

The captain and the two other members of the little coasting vessel's crew were forward, at their evening meal. Once or twice Stark heard a burst of laughter, half-whispered and furtive. It was as though all four shared in some private joke, from which he was rigidly excluded.

The heat was oppressive. Sweat gathered on Stark's dark face. His shirt stuck to his back. The air was heavy with moisture, tainted with the muddy fecundity of the land that brooded westward behind the eternal fog.

There was something ominous about the sea itself. Even on its own world, the Red Sea is hardly more than legend. It lies behind the Mountains of White Cloud, the great barrier wall that hides away half



There was a great boiling roar—the slaves were attacking!

Laughing, she cast him down into the hideous depths, beneath the seas of flaming gas, to where dead blossoms swayed, whispering, over strangely jumbled ruins . . . But there he found the secret of her power, and came surging back—up from the depths, up from the seas, the tortured swamps—to storm her forbidding shrine and seek her within, death like a gift in his hands . . .

a planet. Few men have gone beyond that barrier, into the vast mystery of Inner Venus. Fewer still have come back.

Stark was one of that handful. Three times before he had crossed the mountains, and once he had stayed for nearly a year. But he had never quite grown used to the Red Sea.

It was not water. It was gaseous, dense enough to float the buoyant hulls of the metal ships, and it burned perpetually with its deep inner fires. The mists that clouded it were stained with the bloody glow. Beneath the surface Stark could see the drifts of flame where the lazy currents ran, and the little coiling bursts of sparks that came upward and spread and melted into other bursts, so that the face of the sea was like a cosmos of crimson stars.

It was very beautiful, glowing against the blue, luminous darkness of the night. Beautiful, and strange.

There was a padding of bare feet, and the captain, Malthor, came up to Stark, his outlines dim and ghostly in the gloom.

"We will reach Shuruun," he said, "before the second glass is run."

Stark nodded. "Good."

The voyage had seemed endless, and the close confinement of the narrow deck had got badly on his nerves.

"You will like Shuruun," said the captain jovially. "Our wine, our food, our women—all superb. We don't have many visitors. We keep to ourselves, as you will see. But those who do come . . ."

He laughed, and clapped Stark on the shoulder. "Ah, yes. You will be happy in Shuruun!"

It seemed to Stark that he caught an echo of laughter from the unseen crew, as though they listened and found a hidden jest in Malthor's words.

Stark said, "That's fine."

"Perhaps," said Malthor, "you would like to lodge with me. I could make you a good price."

He had made a good price for Stark's passage from up the coast. An exorbitantly good one.

Stark said, "No."

"You don't have to be afraid," said the Venusian, in a confidential tone. "The strangers who come to Shuruun all have

the same reason. It's a good place to hide. We're out of everybody's reach."

He paused, but Stark did not rise to his bait. Presently he chuckled and went on, "In fact, it's such a safe place that most of the strangers decide to stay on. Now, at my house, I could give you . . ."

Stark said again, flatly, "No."

The captain shrugged. "Very well. Think it over, anyway." He peered ahead into the red, coiling mists. "Ah! See there?" He pointed, and Stark made out the shadowy loom of cliffs. "We are coming into the strait now."

Malthor turned and took the steering sweep himself, the helmsman going forward to join the others. The ship began to pick up speed. Stark saw that she had come into the grip of a current that swept toward the cliffs, a river of fire racing ever more swiftly in the depths of the sea.

THE dark wall seemed to plunge toward them. At first Stark could see no passage. Then, suddenly, a narrow crimson streak appeared, widened, and became a gut of boiling flame, rushing silently around broken rocks. Red fog rose like smoke. The ship quivered, sprang ahead, and tore like a mad thing into the heart of the inferno.

In spite of himself, Stark's hands tightened on the rail. Tattered veils of mist swirled past them. The sea, the air, the ship itself, seemed drenched in blood. There was no sound, in all that wild sweep of current through the strait. Only the sullen fires burst and flowed.

The reflected glare showed Stark that the Straits of Shuruun were defended. Squat fortresses brooded on the cliffs. There were ballistas, and great windlasses for the drawing of nets across the narrow throat. The men of Shuruun could enforce their law, that barred all foreign shipping from their gulf.

They had reason for such a law, and such a defense. The legitimate trade of Shuruun, such as it was, was in wine and the delicate laces woven from spider-silk. Actually, however, the city lived and thrived on piracy, the arts of wrecking, and a contraband trade in the distilled juice of the *vela* poppy.

Looking at the rocks and the fortresses, Stark could understand how it was that Shuruun had been able for more centuries than anyone could tell to victimize the shipping of the Red Sea, and offer a refuge to the outlaw, the wolf's-head, the breaker of tabu.

With startling abruptness, they were through the gut and drifting on the still surface of this all but landlocked arm of the Red Sea.

Because of the shrouding fog, Stark could see nothing of the land. But the smell of it was stronger, warm damp soil and the heavy, faintly rotten perfume of vegetation half jungle, half swamp. Once, through a rift in the wreathing vapor, he thought he glimpsed the shadowy bulk of an island, but it was gone at once.

After the terrifying rush of the strait, it seemed to Stark that the ship barely moved. His impatience and the subtle sense of danger deepened. He began to pace the deck, with the nervous, velvet motion of a prowling cat. The moist, steamy air seemed all but unbreathable after the clean dryness of Mars, from whence he had come so recently. It was oppressively still.

Suddenly he stopped, his head thrown back, listening.

The sound was borne faintly on the slow wind. It came from everywhere and nowhere, a vague dim thing without source or direction. It almost seemed that the night itself had spoken—the hot blue night of Venus, crying out of the mists with a tongue of infinite woe.

It faded and died away, only half heard, leaving behind it a sense of aching sadness, as though all the misery and longing of a world had found voice in that desolate wail.

Stark shivered. For a time there was silence, and then he heard the sound again, now on a deeper note. Still faint and far away, it was sustained longer by the vagaries of the heavy air, and it became a chant, rising and falling. There were no words. It was not the sort of thing that would have need of words. Then it was gone again.

Stark turned to Malthor. "What was that?"

The man looked at him curiously. He seemed not to have heard.

"That wailing sound," said Stark impatiently.

"Oh, that." The Venusian shrugged. "A trick of the wind. It sighs in the hollow rocks around the strait."

HE YAWNED, giving place again to the steersman, and came to stand beside Stark. The Earthman ignored him. For some reason, that sound half heard through the mists had brought his uneasiness to a sharp pitch.

Civilization had brushed over Stark with a light hand. Raised from infancy by half-human aboriginals, his perceptions were still those of a savage. His ear was good.

Malthor lied. That cry of pain was not made by any wind.

"I have known several Earthmen," said Malthor, changing the subject, but not too swiftly. "None of them were like you."

Intuition warned Stark to play along. "I don't come from Earth," he said. "I come from Mercury."

Malthor puzzled over that. Venus is a cloudy world, where no man has ever seen the Sun, let alone a star. The captain had heard vaguely of these things. Earth and Mars he knew of. But Mercury was an unknown world.

Stark explained. "The planet nearest the Sun. It's very hot there. The Sun blazes like a huge fire, and there are no clouds to shield it."

"Ah. That is why your skin is so dark." He held his own pale forearm close to Stark's and shook his head. "I have never seen such skin," he said admiringly. "Nor such great muscles."

Looking up, he went on in a tone of complete friendliness, "I wish you would stay with me. You'll find no better lodgings in Shuruun. And I warn you, there are people in the town who will take advantage of strangers—rob them, even slay them. Now, I am known by all as a man of honour. You could sleep soundly under my roof."

He paused, then added with a smile, "Also, I have a daughter. An excellent cook—and very beautiful."

The woeful chanting came again, dim and distant on the wind, an echo of warning against some unimagined fate.

Stark said for the third time, "No."

He needed no intuition to tell him to walk wide of the captain. The man was a rogue, and not a very subtle one.

A flint-hard, angry look came briefly into Malthor's eyes. "You're a stubborn man. You'll find that Shuruun is no place for stubbornness."

He turned and went away. Stark remained where he was. The ship drifted on through a slow eternity of time. And all down that long still gulf of the Red Sea, through the heat and the wreathing fog, the ghostly chanting haunted him, like the keening of lost souls in some forgotten hell.

Presently the course of the ship was altered. Malthor came again to the after-deck, giving a few quiet commands. Stark saw land ahead, a darker blur on the night, and then the shrouded outlines of a city.

Torches blazed on the quays and in the streets, and the low buildings caught a ruddy glow from the burning sea itself. A squat and ugly town, Shuruun, crouching witch-like on the rocky shore, her ragged skirts dipped in blood.

The ship drifted in toward the quays.

STARK heard a whisper of movement behind him, the hushed and purposeful padding of naked feet. He turned, with the astonishing swiftness of an animal that feels itself threatened, his hand dropping to his gun.

A belying pin, thrown by the steersman, struck the side of his head with stunning force. Reeling, half blinded, he saw the distorted shapes of men closing in upon him. Malthor's voice sounded, low and hard. A second belying pin whizzed through the air and cracked against Stark's shoulder.

Hands were laid upon him. Bodies, heavy and strong, bore him down. Malthor laughed.

Stark's teeth glinted bare and white. Someone's cheek brushed past, and he sank them into the flesh. He began to growl, a sound that should never have come from

a human throat. It seemed to the startled Venusians that the man they had attacked had by some wizardry become a beast, at the first touch of violence.

The man with the torn cheek screamed. There was a voiceless scuffling on the deck, a terrible intensity of motion, and then the great dark body rose and shook itself free of the tangle, and was gone, over the rail, leaving Malthor with nothing but the silken rags of a shirt in his hands.

The surface of the Red Sea closed without a ripple over Stark. There was a burst of crimson sparks, a momentary trail of flame going down like a drowned comet, and then—nothing.

II

STARK DROPPED SLOWLY downward through a strange world. There was no difficulty about breathing, as in a sea of water. The gases of the Red Sea support life quite well, and the creatures that dwell in it have almost normal lungs.

Stark did not pay much attention at first, except to keep his balance automatically. He was still dazed from the blow, and he was raging with anger and pain.

The primitive in him, whose name was not Stark but N'Chaka, and who had fought and starved and hunted in the blazing valleys of Mercury's Twilight Belt, learning lessons he never forgot, wished to return and slay Malthor and his men. He regretted that he had not torn out their throats, for now his trail would never be safe from them.

But the man Stark, who had learned some more bitter lessons in the name of civilization, knew the unwisdom of that. He snarled over his aching head, and cursed the Venusians in the harsh, crude dialect that was his mother tongue, but he did not turn back. There would be time enough for Malthor.

It struck him that the gulf was very deep.

Fighting down his rage, he began to swim in the direction of the shore. There was no sign of pursuit, and he judged that Malthor had decided to let him go. He puzzled over the reason for the attack.

It could hardly be robbery, since he carried nothing but the clothes he stood in, and very little money.

No. There was some deeper reason. A reason connected with Malthor's insistence that he lodge with him. Stark smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. He was thinking of Shuruun, and the things men said about it, around the shores of the Red Sea.

Then his face hardened. The dim coiling fires through which he swam brought him memories of other times he had gone adventuring in the depths of the Red Sea.

He had not been alone then. Helvi had gone with him—the tall son of a barbarian kinglet up-coast by Yarell. They had hunted strange beasts through the crystal forests of the sea-bottom and bathed in the welling flames that pulse from the very heart of Venus to feed the ocean. They had been brothers.

Now Helvi was gone, into Shuruun. He had never returned.

Stark swam on. And presently he saw below him in the red gloom something that made him drop lower, frowning with surprise.

There were trees beneath him. Great forest giants towering up into an eerie sky, their branches swaying gently to the slow wash of the currents.

Stark was puzzled. The forests where he and Helvi had hunted were truly crystalline, without even the memory of life. The "trees" were no more trees in actuality than the branching corals of Terra's southern oceans.

But these were real, or had been. He thought at first that they still lived, for their leaves were green, and here and there creepers had starred them with great nodding blossoms of gold and purple and waxy white. But when he floated down close enough to touch them, he realized that they were dead—trees, creepers, blossoms, all.

They had not mummified, nor turned to stone. They were pliable, and their colours were very bright. Simply, they had ceased to live, and the gases of the sea had preserved them by some chemical magic, so perfectly that barely a leaf had fallen.

Stark did not venture into the shadowy

denseness below the topmost branches. A strange fear came over him, at the sight of that vast forest dreaming in the depths of the gulf, drowned and forgotten, as though wondering why the birds had gone, taking with them the warm rains and the light of day.

He thrust his way upward, himself like a huge dark bird above the branches. An overwhelming impulse to get away from that unearthly place drove him on, his half-wild sense shuddering with an impression of evil so great that it took all his acquired common-sense to assure him that he was not pursued by demons.

HE BROKE the surface at last, to find that he had lost his direction in the red deep and made a long circle around, so that he was far below Shuruun. He made his way back, not hurrying now, and presently clambered out over the black rocks.

He stood at the end of a muddy lane that wandered in toward the town. He followed it, moving neither fast nor slow, but with a wary alertness.

Huts of wattle-and-daub took shape out of the fog, increased in numbers, became a street of dwellings. Here and there rush-lights glimmered through the slitted windows. A man and a woman clung together in a low doorway. They saw him and sprang apart, and the woman gave a little cry. Stark went on. He did not look back, but he knew that they were following him quietly, at a little distance.

The lane twisted snakelike upon itself, crawling now through a crowded jumble of houses. There were more lights, and more people, tall white-skinned folk of the swamp-edges, with pale eyes and long hair the colour of new flax, and the faces of wolves.

Stark passed among them, alien and strange with his black hair and sun-darkened skin. They did not speak, nor try to stop him. Only they looked at him out of the red fog, with a curious blend of amusement and fear, and some of them followed him, keeping well behind. A gang of small naked children came from somewhere among the houses and ran shouting beside him, out of reach, until

one boy threw a stone and screamed something unintelligible except for one word—*Lhari*. Then they all stopped, horrified, and fled.

Stark went on, through the quarter of the lacemakers, heading by instinct toward the wharves. The glow of the Red Sea pervaded all the air, so that it seemed as though the mist was full of tiny drops of blood. There was a smell about the place he did not like, a damp miasma of mud and crowding bodies and wine, and the breath of the *vela* poppy. Shuruun was an unclean town, and it stank of evil.

There was something else about it, a subtle thing that touched Stark's nerves with a chill finger. Fear. He could see the shadow of it in the eyes of the people, hear its undertone in their voices. The wolves of Shuruun did not feel safe in their own kennel. Unconsciously, as this feeling grew upon him, Stark's step grew more and more wary, his eyes more cold and hard.

He came out into a broad square by the harbour front. He could see the ghostly ships moored along the quays, the piled casks of wine, the tangle of masts and cordage dim against the background of the burning gulf. There were many torches here. Large low buildings stood around the square. There was laughter and the sound of voices from the dark verandas, and somewhere a woman sang to the melancholy lilting of a reed pipe.

A suffused glow of light in the distance ahead caught Stark's eye. That way the streets sloped to a higher ground, and straining his vision against the fog, he made out very dimly the tall bulk of a castle crouched on the low cliffs, looking with bright eyes upon the night, and the streets of Shuruun.

Stark hesitated briefly. Then he started across the square toward the largest of the taverns.

There were a number of people in the open space, mostly sailors and their women. They were loose and foolish with wine, but even so they stopped where they were and stared at the dark stranger, and then drew back from him, still staring.

Those who had followed Stark came into the square after him and then paused,

spreading out in an aimless sort of way to join with other groups, whispering among themselves.

The woman stopped singing in the middle of a phrase.

A curious silence fell on the square. A nervous sibilance ran round and round under the silence, and men came slowly out from the verandas and the doors of the wine shops. Suddenly a woman with disheveled hair pointed her arm at Stark and laughed, the shrieking laugh of a harpy.

STARK found his way barred by three tall young men with hard mouths and crafty eyes, who smiled at him as hounds smile before the kill.

"Stranger," they said. "Earthman."

"Outlaw," answered Stark, and it was only half a lie.

One of the young men took a step forward. "Did you fly like a dragon over the Mountains of White Cloud? Did you drop from the sky?"

"I came on Malthor's ship."

A kind of sigh went round the square, and with it the name of Malthor. The eager faces of the young men grew heavy with disappointment. But the leader said sharply, "I was on the quay when Malthor docked. You were not on board."

It was Stark's turn to smile. In the light of the torches, his eyes blazed cold and bright as ice against the sun.

"Ask Malthor the reason for that," he said. "Ask the man with the torn cheek. Or perhaps," he added softly, "you would like to learn for yourselves."

The young men looked at him, scowling, in an odd mood of indecision. Stark settled himself, every muscle loose and ready. And the woman who had laughed crept closer and peered at Stark through her tangled hair, breathing heavily of the poppy wine.

All at once she said loudly, "He came out of the sea. That's where he came from. He's . . ."

One of the young men struck her across the mouth and she fell down in the mud. A burly seaman ran out and caught her by the hair, dragging her to her feet again. His face was frightened and very angry.

He hauled the woman away, cursing her for a fool and beating her as he went. She spat out blood, and said no more.

"Well," said Stark to the young men. "Have you made up your minds?"

"Minds!" said a voice behind them—a harsh-timbered, rasping voice that handled the liquid vocables of the Venusian speech very clumsily indeed. "They have no minds, these whelps! If they had, they'd be off about their business, instead of standing here badgering a stranger."

The young men turned, and now between them Stark could see the man who had spoken. He stood on the steps of the tavern. He was an Earthman, and at first Stark thought he was old, because his hair was white and his face deeply lined. His body was wasted with fever, the muscles all gone to knotty strings twisted over bone. He leaned heavily on a stick, and one leg was crooked and terribly scarred.

He grinned at Stark and said, in colloquial English, "Watch me get rid of 'em!"

He began to tongue-lash the young men, telling them that they were idiots, the misbegotten offspring of swamp-toads, utterly without manners, and that if they did not believe the stranger's story they should go and ask Malthor, as he suggested. Finally he shook his stick at them, fairly screeching.

"Go on, now. Go away! Leave us alone—my brother of Earth and I!"

The young men gave one hesitant glance at Stark's feral eyes. Then they looked at each other and shrugged, and went away across the square half sheepishly, like great loutish boys caught in some misdemeanor.

The white-haired Earthman beckoned to Stark. And, as Stark came up to him on the steps he said under his breath, almost angrily, "You're in a trap."

Stark glanced back over his shoulder. At the edge of the square the three young men had met a fourth, who had his face bound up in a rag. They vanished almost at once into a side street, but not before Stark had recognized the fourth man as Malthor.

It was the captain he had branded.

With loud cheerfulness, the lame man

said in Venusian, "Come in and drink with me, brother, and we will talk of Earth."

III

THE TAVERN WAS OF THE standard low-class Venusian pattern—a single huge room under bare thatch, the wall half open with the reed shutters rolled up, the floor of split logs propped up on piling out of the mud. A long low bar, little tables, mangy skins and heaps of dubious cushions on the floor around them, and at one end the entertainers—two old men with a drum and a reed pipe, and a couple of sulky, tired-looking girls.

The lame man led Stark to a table in the corner and sank down, calling for wine. His eyes, which were dark and haunted by long pain, burned with excitement. His hands shook. Before Stark had sat down he had begun to talk, his words stumbling over themselves as though he could not get them out fast enough.

"How is it there now? Has it changed any? Tell me how it is—the cities, the lights, the paved streets, the women, the Sun. Oh Lord, what I wouldn't give to see the Sun again, and women with dark hair and their clothes on!" He leaned forward, staring hungrily into Stark's face, as though he could see those things mirrored there. "For God's sake, talk to me—talk to me in English, and tell me about Earth!"

"How long have you been here?" asked Stark.

"I don't know. How do you reckon time on a world without a Sun, without one damned little star to look at? Ten years, a hundred years, how should I know? Forever. Tell me about Earth."

Stark smiled wryly. "I haven't been there for a long time. The police were too ready with a welcoming committee. But the last time I saw it, it was just the same."

The lame man shivered. He was not looking at Stark now, but at some place far beyond him.

"Autumn woods," he said. "Red and gold on the brown hills. Snow. I can remember how it felt to be cold. The

air bit you when you breathed it. And the women wore high-heeled slippers. No big bare feet tromping in the mud, but little sharp heels tapping on clean pavement."

Suddenly he glared at Stark, his eyes furious and bright with tears.

"Why the hell did you have to come here and start me remembering? I'm Larrabee. I live in Shuruun. I've been here forever, and I'll be here till I die. There isn't any Earth. It's gone. Just look up into the sky, and you'll know it's gone. There's nothing anywhere but clouds, and Venus, and mud."

He sat still, shaking, turning his head from side to side. A man came with wine, put it down, and went away again. The tavern was very quiet. There was a wide space empty around the two Earthmen. Beyond that people lay on the cushions, sipping the poppy wine and watching with a sort of furtive expectancy.

Abruptly, Larrabee laughed, a harsh sound that held a certain honest mirth.

"I don't know why I should get sentimental about Earth at this late date. Never thought much about it when I was there."

Nevertheless, he kept his gaze averted, and when he picked up his cup his hand trembled so that he spilled some of the wine.

Stark was staring at him in unbelief. "Larrabee," he said. "You're Mike Larrabee. You're the man who got half a million credits out of the strong room of the *Royal Venus*."

Larrabee nodded. "And got away with it, right over the Mountains of White Cloud, that they said couldn't be flown. And do you know where that half a million is now? At the bottom of the Red Sea, along with my ship and my crew, out there in the gulf. Lord knows why I lived." He shrugged. "Well, anyway, I was heading for Shuruun when I crashed, and I got here. So why complain?"

He drank again, deeply, and Stark shook his head.

"You've been here nine years, then, by Earth time," he said. He had never met Larrabee, but he remembered the pictures of him that had flashed across space on

police bands. Larrabee had been a young man then, dark and proud and handsome.

Larrabee guessed his thought. "I've changed, haven't I?"

Stark said lamely, "Everybody thought you were dead."

LARRABEE laughed. After that, for a moment, there was silence. Stark's ears were straining for any sound outside. There was none.

He said abruptly, "What about this trap I'm in?"

"I'll tell you one thing about it," said Larrabee. "There's no way out. I can't help you. I wouldn't if I could, get that straight. But I can't, anyway."

"Thanks," Stark said sourly. "You can at least tell me what goes on."

"Listen," said Larrabee. "I'm a cripple, and an old man, and Shuruun isn't the sweetest place in the Solar System to live. But I do live. I have a wife, a slatternly wench I'll admit, but good enough in her way. You'll notice some little dark-haired brats rolling in the mud. They're mine, too. I have some skill at setting bones and such, and so I can get drunk for nothing as often as I will—which is often. Also, because of this bum leg, I'm perfectly safe. So don't ask me what goes on. I take great pains not to know."

Stark said, "Who are the Lhari?"

"Would you like to meet them?" Larrabee seemed to find something very amusing in that thought. "Just go on up to the castle. They live there. They're the Lords of Shuruun, and they're always glad to meet strangers."

He leaned forward suddenly. "Who are you anyway? What's your name, and why the devil did you come here?"

"My name is Stark. And I came here for the same reason you did."

"Stark," repeated Larrabee slowly, his eyes intent. "That rings a faint bell. Seems to me I saw a *Wanted* flash once, some idiot that had led a native revolt somewhere in the Jovian Colonies—a big cold-eyed brute they referred to colorfully as the wild man from Mercury."

He nodded, pleased with himself. "Wild man, eh? Well, Shuruun will tame you down!"

"Perhaps," said Stark. His eyes shifted constantly, watching Larrabee, watching the doorway and the dark veranda and the people who drank but did not talk among themselves. "Speaking of strangers, one came here at the time of the last rains. He was Venusian, from up coast. A big young man. I used to know him. Perhaps he could help me."

Larrabee snorted. By now, he had drunk his own wine and Stark's too. "Nobody can help you. As for your friend, I never saw him. I'm beginning to think I should never have seen you." Quite suddenly he caught up his stick and got with some difficulty to his feet. He did not look at Stark, but said harshly, "You better get out of here." Then he turned and limped unsteadily to the bar.

Stark rose. He glanced after Larrabee, and again his nostrils twitched to the smell of fear. Then he went out of the tavern the way he had come in, through the front door. No one moved to stop him. Outside, the square was empty. It had begun to rain.

Stark stood for a moment on the steps. He was angry, and filled with a dangerous unease, the hair-trigger nervousness of a tiger that senses the beaters creeping toward him up the wind. He would almost have welcomed the sight of Malthor and the three young men. But there was nothing to fight but the silence and the rain.

HESTEPPED out into the mud, wet and warm around his ankles. An idea came to him, and he smiled, beginning now to move with a definite purpose, along the side of the square.

The sharp downpour strengthened. Rain smoked from Stark's naked shoulders, beat against thatch and mud with a hissing rattle. The harbour had disappeared behind boiling clouds of fog, where water struck the surface of the Red Sea and was turned again instantly by chemical action into vapour. The quays and the neighboring streets were being swallowed up in the impenetrable mist. Lightning came with an eerie bluish flare, and thunder came rolling after it.

Stark turned up the narrow way that led toward the castle.

Its lights were winking out now, one by one, blotted by the creeping fog. Lightning etched its shadowy bulk against the night, and then was gone. And through the noise of the thunder that followed, Stark thought he heard a voice calling.

He stopped, half crouching, his hand on his gun. The cry came again, a girl's voice, thin as the wail of a sea-bird through the driving rain. Then he saw her, a small white blur in the street behind him, running, and even in that dim glimpse of her every line of her body was instinct with fright.

Stark set his back against a wall and waited. There did not seem to be anyone with her, though it was hard to tell in the darkness and the storm.

She came up to him, and stopped, just out of his reach, looking at him and away again with a painful irresoluteness. A bright flash showed her to him clearly. She was young, not long out of her childhood, and pretty in a stupid sort of way. Just now her mouth trembled on the edge of weeping, and her eyes were very large and scared. Her skirt clung to her long thighs, and above it her naked body, hardly fleshed into womanhood, glistened like snow in the wet. Her pale hair hung dripping over her shoulders.

Stark said gently, "What do you want with me?"

She looked at him, so miserably like a wet puppy that he smiled. And as though that smile had taken what little resolution she had out of her, she dropped to her knees, sobbing.

"I can't do it," she wailed. "He'll kill me, but I just can't do it!"

"Do what?" asked Stark.

She stared up at him. "Run away," she urged him. "Run away *now*! You'll die in the swamps, but that's better than being one of the Lost Ones!" She shook her thin arms at him. "*Run away!*"

IV

THE STREET WAS EMPTY. Nothing showed, nothing stirred anywhere. Stark leaned over and pulled the girl to her feet, drawing her in under the shelter of the thatched eaves.

"Now then," he said. "Suppose you stop crying and tell me what this is all about."

Presently, between gulps and hiccoughs, he got the story out of her.

"I am Zareth," she said. "Malthor's daughter. He's afraid of you, because of what you did to him on the ship, so he ordered me to watch for you in the square, when you would come out of the tavern. Then I was to follow you, and . . ."

She broke off, and Stark patted her shoulder. "Go on."

But a new thought had occurred to her. "If I do, will you promise not to beat me, or . . ." She looked at his gun and shivered.

"I promise."

She studied his face, what she could see of it in the darkness, and then seemed to lose some of her fear.

"I was to stop you. I was to say what I've already said, about being Malthor's daughter and the rest of it, and then I was to say that he wanted me to lead you into an ambush while pretending to help you escape, but that I couldn't do it, and would help you to escape anyhow because I hated Malthor and the whole business about the Lost Ones. So you would believe me, and follow me, and I would lead you into the ambush."

She shook her head and began to cry again, quietly this time, and there was nothing of the woman about her at all now. She was just a child, very miserable and afraid. Stark was glad he had branded Malthor.

"But I can't lead you into the ambush. I do hate Malthor, even if he is my father, because he beats me. And the Lost Ones . . ." She paused. "Sometimes I hear them at night, chanting way out there beyond the mist. It is a very terrible sound."

"It is," said Stark. "I've heard it. Who are the Lost Ones, Zareth?"

"I can't tell you that," said Zareth. "It's forbidden even to speak of them. And anyway," she finished honestly, "I don't even know. People disappear, that's all. Not our own people of Shuruun, at least not very often. But strangers like you—and I'm sure my father goes off into the

swamps to hunt among the tribes there, and I'm sure he comes back from some of his voyages with nothing in his hold but men from some captured ship. Why, or what for, I don't know. Except I've heard the chanting."

"They live out there in the gulf, do they, the Lost Ones?"

"They must. There are many islands there."

"And what of the Lhari, the Lords of Shuruun? Don't they know what's going on? Or are they part of it?"

She shuddered, and said, "It's not for us to question the Lhari, nor even to wonder what they do. Those who have are gone from Shuruun, nobody knows where."

Stark nodded. He was silent for a moment, thinking. Then Zareth's little hand touched his shoulder.

"Go," she said. "Lose yourself in the swamps. You're strong, and there's something about you different from other men. You may live to find your way through."

"No. I have something to do before I leave Shuruun." He took Zareth's damp fair head between his hands and kissed her on the forehead. "You're a sweet child, Zareth, and a brave one. Tell Malthor that you did exactly as he told you, and it was not your fault I wouldn't follow you."

"He will beat me anyway," said Zareth philosophically, "but perhaps not quite so hard."

"He'll have no reason to beat you at all, if you tell him the truth—that I would not go with you because my mind was set on going to the castle of the Lhari."

THERE was a long, long silence, while Zareth's eyes widened slowly in horror, and the rain beat on the thatch, and fog and thunder rolled together across Shuruun.

"To the castle," she whispered. "Oh, no! Go into the swamps, or let Malthor take you—but don't go to the castle!" She took hold of his arm, her fingers biting into his flesh with the urgency of her plea. "You're a stranger, you don't know . . . Please, don't go up there!"

"Why not?" asked Stark. "Are the

Lhari demons? Do they devour men?" He loosened her hands gently. "You'd better go now. Tell your father where I am, if he wishes to come after me."

Zareth backed away slowly, out into the rain, staring at him as though she looked at someone standing on the brink of hell, not dead, but worse than dead. Wonder showed in her face, and through it a great yearning pity. She tried once to speak, and then shook her head and turned away, breaking into a run as though she could not endure to look upon Stark any longer. In a second she was gone.

Stark looked after her for a moment, strangely touched. Then he stepped out into the rain again, heading upward along the steep path that led to the castle of the Lords of Shuruun.

The mist was blinding. Stark had to feel his way, and as he climbed higher, above the level of the town, he was lost in the sullen redness. A hot wind blew, and each flare of lighting turned the crimson fog to a hellish purple. The night was full of a vast hissing where the rain poured into the gulf. He stopped once to hide his gun in a cleft between the rocks.

At length he stumbled against a carven pillar of black stone and found the gate that hung from it, a massive thing sheathed in metal. It was barred, and the pounding of his fists upon it made little sound.

Then he saw the gong, a huge disc of beaten gold beside the gate. Stark picked up the hammer that lay there, and set the deep voice of the gong rolling out between the thunder-bolts.

A barred slit opened and a man's eyes looked out at him. Stark dropped the hammer.

"Open up!" he shouted. "I would speak with the Lhari!"

From within he heard an echo of laughter. Scraps of voices came to him on the wind, and then more laughter, and then, slowly, the great valves of the gate creaked open, wide enough only to admit him.

He stepped through, and the gateway shut behind him with a ringing clash.

He stood in a huge open court. Enclosed within its walls was a village of thatched huts, with open sheds for cooking, and behind them were pens for the

stabling of beasts, the wingless dragons of the swamps that can be caught and broken to the goad.

He saw this only in vague glimpses, because of the fog. The men who had let him in clustered around him, thrusting him forward into the light that streamed from the huts.

"He would speak with the Lhari!" one of them shouted, to the women and children who stood in the doorways watching. The words were picked up and tossed around the court, and a great burst of laughter went up.

Stark eyed them, saying nothing. They were a puzzling breed. The men, obviously, were soldiers and guards to the Lhari, for they wore the harness of fighting men. As obviously, these were their wives and children, all living behind the castle walls and having little to do with Shuruun.

But it was their racial characteristics that surprised him. They had interbred with the pale tribes of the Swamp-Edges that had peopled Shuruun, and there were many with milk-white hair and broad faces. Yet even these bore an alien stamp. Stark was puzzled, for the race he would have named was unknown here behind the Mountains of White Cloud, and almost unknown anywhere on Venus at Sea-level, among the sweltering marshes and the eternal fogs.

THEY stared at him even more curiously, remarking on his skin and his black hair and the unfamiliar modelling of his face. The women nudged each other and whispered, giggling, and one of them said aloud, "They'll need a barrel-hoop to collar that neck!"

The guards closed in around him. "Well, if you wish to see the Lhari, you shall," said the leader, "but first we must make sure of you."

Spear-points ringed him round. Stark made no resistance while they stripped him of all he had, except for his shorts and sandals. He had expected that, and it amused him, for there was little enough for them to take.

"All right," said the leader. "Come on."

The whole village turned out in the rain to escort Stark to the castle door.

There was about them the same ominous interest that the people of Shuruun had had, with one difference. They knew what was supposed to happen to him, knew all about it, and were therefore doubly appreciative of the game.

The great doorway was square and plain, and yet neither crude nor ungraceful. The castle itself was built of the black stone, each block perfectly cut and fitted, and the door itself was sheathed in the same metal as the gate, darkened but not corroded.

The leader of the guard cried out to the warder, "Here is one who would speak with the Lhari!"

The warder laughed. "And so he shall! Their night is long, and dull."

He flung open the heavy door and cried the word down the hallway. Stark could hear it echoing hollowly within, and presently from the shadows came servants clad in silks and wearing jewelled collars, and from the guttural sound of their laughter Stark knew that they had no tongues.

Stark faltered, then. The doorway loomed hollowly before him, and it came to him suddenly that evil lay behind it and that perhaps Zareth was wiser than he when she warned him from the Lhari.

Then he thought of Helvi, and of other things, and lost his fear in anger. Lightning burned the sky. The last cry of the dying storm shook the ground under his feet. He thrust the grinning warder aside and strode into the castle, bringing a veil of the red fog with him, and did not listen to the closing of the door, which was stealthy and quiet as the footfall of approaching Death.

Torches burned here and there along the walls, and by their smoky glare he could see that the hall way was like the entrance—square and unadorned, faced with the black rock. It was high, and wide, and there was about the architecture a calm reflective dignity that had its own beauty, in some ways more impressive than the sensuous loveliness of the ruined palaces he had seen on Mars.

There were no carvings here, no paintings nor frescoes. It seemed that the builders had felt that the hall itself was

enough, in its massive perfection of line and the sombre gleam of polished stone. The only decoration was in the window embrasures. These were empty now, open to the sky with the red fog wreathing through them, but there were still scraps of jewel-toned panes clinging to the fretwork, to show what they had once been.

A strange feeling swept over Stark. Because of his wild upbringing, he was abnormally sensitive to the sort of impressions that most men receive either dully or not at all.

Walking down the hall, preceded by the tongueless creatures in their bright silks and blazing collars, he was struck by a subtle *difference* in the place. The castle itself was only an extension of the minds of its builders, a dream shaped into reality. Stark felt that that dark, cool, curiously timeless dream had not originated in a mind like his own, nor like that of any man he had ever seen.

Then the end of the hall was reached, the way barred by low broad doors of gold fashioned in the same chaste simplicity.

A soft scurrying of feet, a shapeless titling from the servants, a glancing of malicious, mocking eyes. The golden doors swung open, and Stark was in the presence of the Lhari.

V

THEY HAD THE APPEARANCE in that first glance, of creatures glimpsed in a fever-dream, very bright and distant, robed in a misty glow that gave them an illusion of unearthly beauty.

The place in which the Earthman now stood was like a cathedral for breadth and loftiness. Most of it was in darkness, so that it seemed to reach without limit above and on all sides, as though the walls were only shadowy phantasms of the night itself. The polished black stone under his feet held a dim translucent gleam, depthless as water in a black tarn. There was no substance anywhere.

Far away in this shadowy vastness burned a cluster of lamps, a galaxy of little stars to shed a silvery light upon the Lords of Shuruun.

There had been no sound in the place when Stark entered, for the opening of the golden doors had caught the attention of the Lhari and held it in contemplation of the stranger. Stark began to walk toward them in this utter silliness.

Quite suddenly, in the impenetrable gloom somewhere to his right, there came a sharp scuffling and a scratching of reptilian claws, a hissing and a sort of low angry muttering, all magnified and distorted by the echoing vault into a huge demoniac whispering that swept all around him.

Stark whirled around, crouched and ready, his eyes blazing and his body bathed in cold sweat. The noise increased, rushing toward him. From the distant glow of the lamps came a woman's tinkling laughter, thin crystal broken against the vault. The hissing and snarling rose to hollow crescendo, and Stark saw a blurred shape bounding at him.

His hands reached out to receive the rush, but it never came. The strange shape resolved itself into a boy of about ten, who dragged after him on a bit of rope a young dragon, new and toothless from the egg, and protesting with all its strength.

Stark straightened up, feeling let down and furious—and relieved. The boy scowled at him through a forelock of silver curls. Then he called him a very dirty word and rushed away, kicking and hauling at the little beast until it raged like the father of all dragons and sounded like it, too, in that vast echo chamber.

A voice spoke. Slow, harsh, sexless, it rang thinly through the vault. Thin—but a steel blade is thin, too. It speaks inexorably, and its word is final.

The voice said, "Come here, into the light."

Stark obeyed the voice. As he approached the lamps, the aspect of the Lhari changed and steadied. Their beauty remained, but it was not the same. They had looked like angels. Now that he could see them clearly, Stark thought that they might have been the children of Lucifer himself.

There were six of them, counting the

boy. Two men, about the same age as Stark, with some complicated gambling game forgotten between them. A woman, beautiful, gowned in white silk, sitting with her hands in her lap, doing nothing. A woman, younger, not so beautiful perhaps, but with a look of stormy and bitter vitality. She wore a short tunic of crimson, and a stout leather glove on her left hand, where perched a flying thing of prey with its fierce eyes hooded.

The boy stood beside the two men, his head poised arrogantly. From time to time he cuffed the little dragon, and it snapped at him with its impotent jaws. He was proud of himself for doing that. Stark wondered how he would behave with the beast when it had grown its fangs.

Opposite him, crouched on a heap of cushions, was a third man. He was deformed, with an ungainly body and long spidery arms, and in his lap a sharp knife lay on a block of wood, half formed into the shape of an obese creature half woman, half pure evil. Stark saw with a flash of surprise that the face of the deformed young man, of all the faces there, was truly human, truly beautiful. His eyes were old in his boyish face, wise, and very sad in their wisdom. He smiled upon the stranger, and his smile was more compassionate than tears.

THEY looked at Stark, all of them, with restless, hungry eyes. They were the pure breed, that had left its stamp of alienage on the pale-haired folk of the swamps, the serfs who dwelt in the huts outside.

They were of the Cloud People, the folk of the High Plateaus, kings of the land on the farther slopes of the Mountains of White Cloud. It was strange to see them here, on the dark side of the Barrier wall, but here they were. How they had come, and why, leaving their rich cool plains for the fetor of these foreign swamps, he could not guess. But there was no mistaking them—the proud fine shaping of their bodies, their alabaster skin, their eyes that were all colours and none, like the dawn sky, their hair that was pure warm silver.

They did not speak. They seemed to be waiting for permission to speak, and Stark wondered which one of them had voiced that steely summons.

Then it came again. "Come here—come closer." And he looked beyond them, beyond the circle of lamps into the shadows again, and saw the speaker.

She lay upon a low bed, her head propped on silken pillows, her vast, her incredibly gigantic body covered with a silken pall. Only her arms were bare, two shapeless masses of white flesh ending in tiny hands. From time to time she stretched one out and took a morsel of food from the supply laid ready beside her, snuffling and wheezing with the effort, and then gulped the tidbit down with a horrible voracity.

Her features had long ago dissolved into a shaking formlessness, with the exception of her nose, which rose out of the fat curved and cruel and thin, like the bony beak of the creature that sat on the girl's wrist and dreamed its hooded dreams of blood. And her eyes . . .

Stark looked into her eyes and shuddered. Then he glanced at the carving half formed in the cripple's lap, and knew what thought had guided the knife.

Half woman, half pure evil. And strong. Very strong. Her strength lay naked in her eyes for all to see, and it was an ugly strength. It could tear down mountains, but it could never build.

He saw her looking at him. Her eyes bored into his as though they would search out his very guts and study them, and he knew that she expected him to turn away, unable to bear her gaze. He did not. Presently he smiled and said, "I have outstared a rock-lizard, to determine which of us should eat the other. And I've outstared the very rock while waiting for him."

She knew that he spoke the truth. Stark expected her to be angry, but she was not. A vague mountainous rippling shook her and emerged at length as a voiceless laughter.

"You see that?" she demanded, addressing the others. "You whelps of the Lhari—not one of you dares to face me down, yet here is a great dark creature from the

gods know where who can stand and shame you."

She glanced again at Stark. "What demon's blood brought you forth, that you have learned neither prudence nor fear?"

Stark answered sombrely, "I learned them both before I could walk. But I learned another thing also—a thing called anger."

"And you are angry?"

"Ask Malthor if I am, and why!"

He saw the two men start a little, and a slow smile crossed the girl's face.

"Malthor," said the hulk upon the bed, and ate a mouthful of roast meat dripping with fat. "That is interesting. But rage against Malthor did not bring you here. I am curious, Stranger. Speak."

"I will."

STARK glanced around. The place was a tomb, a trap. The very air smelled of danger. The younger folk watched him in silence. Not one of them had spoken since he came in, except the boy who had cursed him, and that was unnatural in itself. The girl leaned forward, idly stroking the creature on her wrist so that it stirred and ran its knife-like talons in and out of their bony sheaths with sensuous pleasure. Her gaze on Stark was bold and cool, oddly challenging. Of them all, she alone saw him as a man. To the others he was a problem, a diversion—something less than human.

Stark said, "A man came to Shuruun at the time of the last rains. His name was Helvi, and he was son of a little king by Yarell. He came seeking his brother, who had broken tabu and fled for his life. Helvi came to tell him that the ban was lifted, and he might return. Neither one came back."

The small evil eyes were amused, blinking in their tallowy creases. "And so?"

"And so I have come after Helvi, who is my friend."

Again there was the heaving of that bulk of flesh, the explosion of laughter that hissed and wheezed in snakelike echoes through the vault.

"Friendship must run deep with you, Stranger. Ah, well. The Lhari are kind of heart. You shall find your friend."

And as though that were the signal to end their deferential silence, the younger folk burst into laughter also, until the vast hall rang with it, giving back a sound like demons laughing on the edge of Hell.

The cripple only did not laugh, but bent his bright head over his carving, and sighed.

The girl sprang up. "Not yet, Grandmother! Keep him awhile."

The cold, cruel eyes shifted to her. "And what will you do with him, Varra? Haul him about on a string, like Bor with his wretched beast?"

"Perhaps—though I think it would need a stout chain to hold him." Varra turned and looked at Stark, bold and bright, taking in the breadth and the height of him, the shaping of the great smooth muscles, the iron line of the jaw. She smiled. Her mouth was very lovely, like the red fruit of the swamp tree that bears death in its pungent sweetness.

"Here is a man," she said. "The first man I have seen since my father died."

The two men at the gaming table rose, their faces flushed and angry. One of them strode forward and gripped the girl's arm roughly.

"So I am not a man," he said, with surprising gentleness. "A sad thing, for one who is to be your husband. It's best that we settle that now, before we wed."

Varra nodded. Stark saw that the man's fingers were cutting savagely into the firm muscle of her arm, but she did not wince.

"High time to settle it all, Egil. You have borne enough from me. The day is long overdue for my taming. I must learn now to bend my neck, and acknowledge my lord."

For a moment Stark thought she meant it, the note of mockery in her voice was so subtle. Then the woman in white, who all this time had not moved nor changed expression, voiced again the thin, tinkling laugh he had heard once before. From that, and the dark suffusion of blood in Egil's face, Stark knew that Varra was only casting the man's own phrases back at him. The boy let out one derisive bark, and was cuffed into silence.

Varra looked straight at Stark. "Will you fight for me?" she demanded.

Quite suddenly, it was Stark's turn to laugh. "No!" he said.

Varra shrugged. "Very well, then. I must fight for myself."

"Man," snarled Egil. "I'll show you who's a man, you scapegrace little vixen!"

He wrenched off his girdle with his free hand, at the same time bending the girl around so he could get a fair shot at her. The creature of prey, a Terran falcon, clung to her wrist, beating its wings and screaming, its hooded head jerking.

WITH a motion so quick that it was hardly visible, Varra slipped the hood and flew the creature straight for Egil's face.

He let go, flinging up his arms to ward off the talons and the tearing beak. The wide wings beat and hammered. Egil yelled. The boy Bor got out of range and danced up and down shrieking with delight.

Varra stood quietly. The bruises were blackening on her arm, but she did not deign to touch them. Egil blundered against the gaming table and sent the ivory pieces flying. Then he tripped over a cushion and fell flat, and the hungry talons ripped his tunic to ribbons down the back.

Varra whistled, a clear peremptory call. The creature gave a last peck at the back of Egil's head and flopped sullenly back to its perch on her wrist. She held it, turning toward Stark. He knew from the poise of her that she was on the verge of launching her pet at him. But she studied him and then shook her head.

"No," she said, and slipped the hood back on. "You would kill it."

Egil had scrambled up and gone off into the darkness, sucking a cut on his arm. His face was black with rage. The other man looked at Varra.

"If you were pledged to me," he said, "I'd have that temper out of you!"

"Come and try it," answered Varra.

The man shrugged and sat down. "It's not my place. I keep the peace in my own house." He glanced at the woman in white, and Stark saw that her face, hitherto blank of any expression, had taken on a look of abject fear.

"You do," said Varra, "and, if I were

Arel, I would stab you while you slept. But you're safe. She had no spirit to begin with."

Arel shivered and looked steadfastly at her hands. The man began to gather up the scattered pieces. He said casually, "Egil will wring your neck some day, Varra, and I shan't weep to see it."

All this time the old woman had eaten and watched, watched and eaten, her eyes glittering with interest.

"A pretty brood, are they not?" she demanded of Stark. "Full of spirit, quarrelling like young hawks in the nest. That's why I keep them around me, so—they are such sport to watch. All except Treon there." She indicated the crippled youth. "He does nothing. Dull and soft-mouthed, worse than Arel. What a grandson to be cursed with! But his sister has fire enough for two." She munched a sweet, grunting with pride.

Treon raised his head and spoke, and his voice was like music, echoing with an eerie liveliness in that park place.

"Dull I may be, Grandmother, and weak in body, and without hope. Yet I shall be the last of the Lhari. Death sits waiting on the towers, and he shall gather you all before me. I know, for the winds have told me."

He turned his suffering eyes upon Stark and smiled, a smile of such woe and resignation that the Earthman's heart ached with it. Yet there was a thankfulness in it too, as though some long waiting was over at last.

"You," he said softly, "Stranger with the fierce eyes. I saw you come, out of the darkness, and where you set foot there was a bloody print. Your arms were red to the elbows, and your breast was splashed with the redness, and on your brow was the symbol of death. Then I knew, and the wind whispered into my ear, 'It is so. This man shall pull the castle down, and its stones shall crush Shuruun and set the Lost Ones free.'"

He laughed, very quietly. "Look at him, all of you. For he will be your doom!"

There was a moment's silence, and Stark, with all the superstitions of a wild race thick within him, turned cold to the roots of his hair. Then the old woman

said disgustedly, "Have the winds warned you of this, my idiot?"

And with astonishing force and accuracy she picked up a ripe fruit and flung it at Treon.

"Stop your mouth with that," she told him. "I am weary to death of your prophecies."

TREON looked at the crimson juice trickling slowly down the breast of his tunic, to drip upon the carving in his lap. The half formed head was covered with it. Treon was shaken with silent mirth.

"Well," said Varra, coming up to Stark, "what do you think of the Lhari? The proud Lhari, who would not stoop to mingle their blood with the cattle of the swamps. My half-witted brother, my worthless cousins, that little monster Bor who is the last twig of the tree—do you wonder I flew my falcon at Egil?"

She waited for an answer, her head thrown back, the silver curls framing her face like wisps of storm-cloud. There was a swagger about her that at once irritated and delighted Stark. A hellcat, he thought, but a mighty fetching one, and bold as brass. Bold—and honest. Her lips were parted, midway between anger and a smile.

He caught her to him suddenly and kissed her, holding her slim strong body as though she were a doll. He was in no hurry to set her down. When at last he did, he grinned and said, "Was that what you wanted?"

"Yes," answered Varra. "That was what I wanted." She spun about, her jaw set dangerously. "Grandmother . . ."

She got no farther. Stark saw that the old woman was attempting to sit upright, her face purpling with effort and the most terrible wrath he had ever seen.

"You," she gasped at the girl. She choked on her fury and her shortness of breath, and then Egil came soft-footed into the light, bearing in his hand a thing made of black metal and oddly shaped, with a blunt, thick muzzle.

"Lie back, Grandmother," he said. "I had a mind to use this on Varra—"

Even as he spoke he pressed a stud,

and Stark in the act of leaping for the sheltering darkness, crashed down and lay like a dead man. There had been no sound, no flash, nothing, but a vast hand that smote him suddenly into oblivion.

Egil finished,—"but I see a better target."

VI

RED. RED. RED. THE COLOUR of blood. Blood in his eyes. He was remembering now. The quarry had turned on him, and they had fought on the bare, blistering rocks.

Nor had N'Chaka killed. The Lord of the Rocks was very big, a giant among lizards, and N'Chaka was small. The Lord of the Rocks had laid open N'Chaka's head before the wooden spear had more than scratched his flank.

It was strange that N'Chaka still lived. The Lord of the Rocks must have been full fed. Only that had saved him.

N'Chaka groaned, not with pain, but with shame. He had failed. Hoping for a great triumph, he had disobeyed the tribal law that forbids a boy to hunt the quarry of a man, and he had failed. Old One would not reward him with the girdle and the flint spear of manhood. Old One would give him to the women for the punishment of little whips. Tika would laugh at him, and it would be many seasons before Old One would grant him permission to try the Man's Hunt.

Blood in his eyes.

He blinked to clear them. The instinct of survival was prodding him. He must arouse himself and creep away, before the Lord of the Rocks returned to eat him.

The redness would not go away. It swam and flowed, strangely sparkling. He blinked again, and tried to lift his head, and could not, and fear struck down upon him like the iron frost of night upon the rocks of the valley.

It was all wrong. He could see himself clearly, a naked boy dizzy with pain, rising and clambering over the ledges and the shale to the safety of the cave. He could see that, and yet he could not move.

All wrong. Time, space, the universe, darkened and turned.

A voice spoke to him. A girl's voice. Not Tika's and the speech was strange.

Tika was dead. Memories rushed through his mind, the bitter things, the cruel things. Old One was dead, and all the others . . .

The voice spoke again, calling him by a name that was not his own.

Stark.

Memory shattered into a kaleidoscope of broken pictures, fragments, rushing, spinning. He was adrift among them. He was lost, and the terror of it brought a scream into his throat.

Soft hands touching his face, gentle words, swift and soothing. The redness cleared and steadied, though it did not go away, and quite suddenly he was himself again, with all his memories where they belonged.

HE WAS lying on his back, and Zareth, Malthor's daughter, was looking down at him. He knew now what the redness was. He had seen it too often before not to know. He was somewhere at the bottom of the Red Sea—that weird ocean in which a man can breathe.

And he could not move. That had not changed, nor gone away. His body was dead.

The terror he had felt before was nothing to the agony that filled him now. He lay entombed in his own flesh, staring up at Zareth, wanting an answer to a question he dared not ask.

She understood, from the look in his eyes.

"It's all right," she said, and smiled. "It will wear off. You'll be all right. It's only the weapon of the Lhari. Somehow it puts the body to sleep, but it will wake again."

Stark remembered the black object that Egil had held in his hands. A projector of some sort, then, beaming a current of high-frequency vibration that paralyzed the nerve centers. He was amazed. The Cloud People were barbarians themselves, though on a higher scale than the swamp-edge tribes, and certainly had no such scientific proficiency. He wondered where the Lhari had got hold of such a weapon.

It didn't really matter. Not just now.

Relief swept over him, bringing him dangerously close to tears. The effect would wear off. At the moment, that was all he cared about.

He looked up at Zareth again. Her pale hair floated with the slow breathing of the sea, a milky cloud against the spark-shot crimson. He saw now that her face was drawn and shadowed, and there a terrible hopelessness in her eyes. She had been alive when he first saw her—frightened, not too bright, but full of emotion and a certain dogged courage. Now the spark was gone, crushed out.

She wore a collar around her white neck, a ring of dark metal with the ends fused together for all time.

"Where are we?" he asked.

And she answered, her voice carrying deep and hollow in the dense substance of the sea, "We are in the place of the Lost Ones."

Stark looked beyond her, as far as he could see, since he was unable to turn his head. And wonder came to him.

Black walls, black vault above him, a vast hall filled with the wash of the sea that slipped in streaks of whispering flame through the high embrasures. A hall that was twin to the vault of shadows where he had met the Lhari.

"There is a city," said Zareth dully. "You will see it soon. You will see nothing else until you die."

Stark said, very gently, "How do you come here, little one?"

"Because of my father. I will tell you all I know, which is little enough. Malthor has been slaver to the Lhari for a long time. There are a number of them among the captains of Shuruun, but that is a thing that is never spoken of—so I, his daughter, could only guess. I was sure of it when he sent me after you."

She laughed, a bitter sound. "Now I'm here, with the collar of the Lost Ones on my neck. But Malthor is here, too." She laughed again, ugly laughter to come from a young mouth. Then she looked at Stark, and her hand reached out timidly to touch his hair in what was almost a caress. Her eyes were wide, and soft, and full of tears.

"Why didn't you go into the swamps when I warned you?"

Stark answered stolidly, "Too late to worry about that now." Then, "You say Malthor is here, a slave?"

"Yes." Again, that look of wonder and admiration in her eyes. "I don't know what you said or did to the Lhari, but the Lord Egil came down in a black rage and cursed my father for a bungling fool because he could not hold you. My father whined and made excuses, and all would have been well—only his curiosity got the better of him and he asked the Lord Egil what had happened. You were like a wild beast, Malthor said, and he hoped you had not harmed the Lady Varra, as he could see from Egil's wounds that there had been trouble.

"The Lord Egil turned quite purple. I thought he was going to fall in a fit."

"Yes," said Stark. "That was the wrong thing to say." The ludicrous side of it struck him, and he was suddenly roaring with laughter. "Malthor should have kept his mouth shut!"

"Egil called his guard and ordered them to take Malthor. And when he realized what had happened, Malthor turned on me, trying to say that it was all my fault, that I let you escape."

Stark stopped laughing.

Her voice went on slowly, "Egil seemed quite mad with fury. I have heard that the Lhari are all mad, and I think it is so. At any rate, he ordered me taken too, for he wanted to stamp Malthor's seed into the mud forever. So we are here."

There was a long silence. Stark could think of no word of comfort, and as for hope, he had better wait until he was sure he could at least raise his head. Egil might have damaged him permanently, out of spite. In fact, he was surprised he wasn't dead.

He glanced again at the collar on Zareth's neck. Slave. Slave to the Lhari, in the city of the Lost Ones.

What the devil did they do with slaves, at the bottom of the sea?

The heavy gases conducted sound remarkably well, except for an odd property of diffusion which made it seem that a voice came from everywhere at once. Now, all at once, Stark became aware of a dull clamor of voices drifting towards him.

He tried to see, and Zareth turned his head carefully so that he might.

The Lost Ones were returning from whatever work it was they did.

OUT of the dim red murk beyond the open door they swam, into the long, long vastness of the hall that was filled with same red murk, moving slowly, their white bodies trailing wakes of sullen flame. The host of the damned drifting through a strange red-litten hell, weary and without hope.

One by one they sank onto pallets laid in rows on the black stone floor, and lay there, utterly exhausted, their pale hair lifting and floating with the slow eddies of the sea. And each one wore a collar.

One man did not lie down. He came toward Stark, a tall barbarian who drew himself with great strokes of his arms so that he was wrapped in wheeling sparks. Stark knew his face.

"Helvi," he said, and smiled in welcome. "Brother!"

Helvi crouched down—a great handsome boy he had been the time Stark saw him, but he was a man now, with all the laughter turned to grim deep lines around his mouth and the bones of his face standing out like granite ridges.

"Brother," he said again, looking at Stark through a glitter of unashamed tears. "Fool." And he cursed Stark savagely because he had come to Shuruun to look for an idiot who had gone the same way, and was already as good as dead.

"Would you have followed me?" asked Stark.

"But I am only an ignorant child of the swamps," said Helvi. "You come from space, you know the other worlds, you can read and write—you should have better sense!"

Stark grinned. "And I'm still an ignorant child of the rocks. So we're two fools together. Where is Tobal?"

Tobal was Helvi's brother, who had broken tabu and looked for refuge in Shuruun. Apparently he had found peace at last, for Helvi shook his head.

"A man cannot live too long under the sea. It is not enough merely to breath and eat. Tobal over-ran his time, and I am

close to the end of mine." He held up his hand and then swept it down sharply, watching the broken fires dance along his arms.

"The mind breaks before the body," said Helvi casually, as though it were a matter of no importance.

Zareth spoke. "Helvi has guarded you each period while the others slept."

"And not I alone," said Helvi. "The little one stood with me."

"Guarded me!" said Stark. "Why?"

For answer, Helvi gestured toward a pallet not far away. Malthor lay there, his eyes half open and full of malice, the fresh scar livid on his cheek.

"He feels," said Helvi, "that you should not have fought upon his ship."

Stark felt an inward chill of horror. To lie here helpless, watching Malthor come toward him with open fingers reaching for his helpless throat . . .

He made a passionate effort to move, and gave up, gasping. Helvi grinned.

"Now is the time I should wrestle you, Stark for I never could throw you before." He gave Stark's head a shake, very gentle for all its apparent roughness. "You'll be throwing me again. Sleep now, and don't worry."

He settled himself to watch, and presently in spite of himself Stark slept, with Zareth curled at his feet like a little dog.

There was no time down there in the heart of the Red Sea. No daylight, no dawn, no space of darkness. No winds blew, no rain nor storm broke the endless silence. Only the lazy currents whispered by on their way to nowhere, and the red sparks danced, and the great hall waited, remembering the past.

Stark waited, too. How long he never knew, but he was used to waiting. He had learned his patience on the knees of the great mountains whose heads lift proudly into open space to look at the Sun, and he had absorbed their own contempt for time.

Little by little, life returned to his body. A mongrel guard came now and again to examine him, pricking Stark's flesh with his knife to test the reaction, so that Stark should not malingering.

He reckoned without Stark's control.

The Earthman bore his prodding without so much as a twitch until his limbs were completely his own again. Then he sprang up and pitched the man half the length of the hall, turning over and over, yelling with startled anger.

At the next period of labour, Stark was driven with the rest out into the City of the Lost Ones.

VII

STARK HAD BEEN IN PLACES before that oppressed him with a sense of their strangeness or their wickedness—Sinharat, the lovely ruin of coral and gold lost in the Martian wastes; Jekkara, Valkis—the Low-Canal towns that smell of blood and wine; the cliff-caves of Arianrhod on the edge of Darkside, the buried tomb-cities of Callisto. But this—this was nightmare to haunt a man's dreams.

He stared about him as he went in the long line of slaves, and felt such a cold shuddering contraction of his belly as he had never known before.

Wide avenues paved with polished blocks of stone, perfect as ebon mirrors. Buildings, tall and stately, pure and plain, with a calm strength that could outlast the ages. Black, all black, with no fripperies of paint or carving to soften them, only here and there a window like a drowned jewel glinting through the red.

Vines like drifts of snow cascading down the stones. Gardens with close-clipped turf and flowers lifting bright on their green stalks, their petals open to a daylight that was gone, their head bending as though to some forgotten breeze. All neat, all tended, the branches pruned, the fresh soil turned this morning—by whose hand?

Stark remembered the great forest dreaming at the bottom of the gulf, and shivered. He did not like to think how long ago these flowers must have opened their young bloom to the last light they were ever going to see. For they were dead—dead as the forest, dead as the city. Forever bright—and dead.

Stark thought that it must always have been a silent city. It was impossible to imagine noisy throngs flocking to a market

square down those immense avenues. The black walls were not made to echo song or laughter. Even the children must have moved quietly along the garden paths, small wise creatures born to an ancient dignity.

He was beginning to understand now the meaning of that weird forest. The Gulf of Shuruun had not always been a gulf. It had been a valley, rich, fertile, with this great city in its arms, and here and there on the upper slopes the retreat of some noble or philosopher—of which the castle of the Lhari was a survivor.

A wall or rock had held back the Red Sea from this valley. And then, somehow, the wall had cracked, and the sullen crimson tide had flowed slowly, slowly into the fertile bottoms, rising higher, lapping the towers and the tree-tops in swirling flame, drowning the land forever. Stark wondered if the people had known the disaster was coming, if they had gone forth to tend their gardens for the last time so that they might remain perfect in the embalming gases of the sea.

THE columns of slaves, herded by overseers armed with small black weapons similar to the one Egil had used, came out into a broad square whose farther edges were veiled in the red murk. And Stark looked on ruin.

A great building had fallen in the centre of the square. The gods only knew what force had burst its walls and tossed the giant blocks like pebbles into a heap. But there it was, the one untidy thing in the city, a mountain of debris.

Nothing else was damaged. It seemed that this had been the place of temples, and they stood unharmed, ranked around the sides of the square, the dim fires rippling through their open porticoes. Deep in their inner shadows Stark thought he could make out images, gigantic things brooding in the spark-shot gloom.

He had no chance to study them. The overseers cursed them on, and now he saw what use the slaves were put to. They were clearing away the wreckage of the fallen building.

Helvi whispered, "For sixteen years men have slaved and died down here, and

the work is not half done. And why do the Lhari want it done at all? I'll tell you why. Because they are mad, mad as swamp-dragons gone *musth* in the spring!"

It seemed madness indeed, to labour at this pile of rocks in a dead city at the bottom of the sea. It was madness. And yet the Lhari, though they might be insane, were not fools. There was a reason for it, and Stark was sure it was a good reason—good for the Lhari, at any rate.

An overseer came up to Stark, thrusting him roughly toward a sledge already partly loaded with broken rocks. Stark hesitated, his eyes turning ugly, and Helvi said,

"Come on, you fool! Do you want to be down flat on your back again?"

Stark glanced at the little weapon, blunt and ready, and turned reluctantly to obey. And there began his servitude.

It was a weird sort of life he led. For a while he tried to reckon time by the periods of work and sleep, but he lost count, and it did not greatly matter anyway.

He laboured with the others, hauling the huge blocks away, clearing out the cellars that were partly bared, shoring up weak walls underground. The slaves clung to their old habit of thought, calling the work-periods "days" and the sleep-periods "nights".

Each "day" Egil, or his brother Cond, came to see what had been done, and went away black-browed and disappointed, ordering the work speeded up.

Treon was there also much of the time. He would come slowly in his awkward crabwise way and perch like a pale gargoyle on the stones, never speaking, watching with his sad beautiful eyes. He woke a vague foreboding in Stark. There was something awesome in Treon's silent patience, as though he waited the coming of some black doom, long delayed but inevitable. Stark would remember the prophecy, and shiver.

It was obvious to Stark after a while that the Lhari were clearing the building to get at the cellars underneath. The great dark caverns already bared had yielded nothing, but the brothers still hoped. Over and over Cond and Egil sounded the

walls and the floors, prying here and there, and chafing at the delay in opening up the underground labyrinth. What they hoped to find, no one knew.

Varra came, too. Alone, and often, she would drift down through the dim mist-fires and watch, smiling a secret smile, her hair like blown silver where the currents played with it. She had nothing but curt words for Egil, but she kept her eyes on the great dark Earthman, and there was a look in them that stirred his blood. Egil was not blind, and it stirred his too, but in a different way.

ZARETH saw that look. She kept as close to Stark as possible, asking no favours, but following him around with a sort of quiet devotion, seeming contented only when she was near him. One "night" in the slave barracks she crouched beside his pallet, her hand on his bare knee. She did not speak, and her face was hidden by the floating masses of her hair.

Stark turned her head so that he could see her, pushing the pale cloud gently away.

"What troubles you, little sister?"

Her eyes were wide and shadowed with some vague fear. But she only said, "It's not my place to speak."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." Her mouth trembled, and then suddenly she said, "Oh, it's foolish, I know. But the woman of the Lhari . . ."

"What about her?"

"She watches you. Always she watches you! And the Lord Egil is angry. There is something in her mind, and it will bring you only evil. I know it!"

"It seems to me," said Stark wryly, "that the Lhari have already done as much evil as possible to all of us."

"No," answered Zareth, with an odd wisdom. "Our hearts are still clean."

Stark smiled. He leaned over and kissed her. "I'll be careful, little sister."

Quite suddenly she flung her arms around his neck and clung to him tightly, and Stark's face sobered. He patted her, rather awkwardly, and then she had gone, to curl up on her own pallet with her head buried in her arms.

Stark lay down. His heart was sad, and

there was a stinging moisture in his eyes.

The red eternities dragged on. Stark learned what Helvi had meant when he said that the mind broke before the body. The sea bottom was no place for creatures of the upper air. He learned also the meaning of the metal collars, and the manner of Tobal's death.

Helvi explained.

"There are boundaries laid down. Within them we may range, if we have the strength and the desire after work. Beyond them we may not go. And there is no chance of escape by breaking through the barrier. How this is done I do not understand, but it is so, and the collars are the key to it.

"When a slave approaches the barrier the collar brightens as though with fire, and the slave falls. I have tried this myself, and I know. Half-paralyzed, you may still crawl back to safety. But if you are mad, as Tobal was, and charge the barrier strongly . . ."

He made a cutting motion with his hands.

Stark nodded. He did not attempt to explain electricity or electronic vibrations to Helvi, but it seemed plain enough that the force with which the Lhari kept their slaves in check was something of the sort. The collars acted as conductors, perhaps for the same type of beam that was generated in the hand-weapons. When the metal broke the invisible boundary line it triggered off a force-beam from the central power station, in the manner of the obedient electric eye that opens doors and rings alarm bells. First a warning—then death.

THE boundaries were wide enough, extending around the city and enclosing a good bit of forest beyond it. There was no possibility of a slave hiding among the trees, because the collar could be traced by the same type of beam, turned to low power, and the punishment meted out to a retaken man was such that few were foolish enough to try that game.

The surface, of course, was utterly forbidden. The one unguarded spot was the island where the central power station was, and here the slaves were allowed to come

sometimes at night. The Lhari had discovered that they lived longer and worked better if they had an occasional breath of air and a look at the sky.

Many times Stark made that pilgrimage with the others. Up from the red depths they would come, through the reeling bands of fire where the currents ran, through the clouds of crimson sparks and the sullen patches of stillness that were like pools of blood, a company of white ghosts shrouded in flame, rising from their tomb for a little taste of the world they had lost.

It didn't matter that they were so weary they had barely the strength to get back to the barracks and sleep. They found the strength. To walk again on the open ground, to be rid of the eternal crimson dusk and the oppressive weight on the chest—to look up into the hot blue night of Venus and smell the fragrance of the *liha*-trees borne on the land wind . . . They found the strength.

They sang here, sitting on the island rocks and staring through the mists toward the shore they would never see again. It was their chanting that Stark had heard when he came down the gulf with Malthor, that wordless cry of grief and loss. Now he was here himself, holding Zareth close to comfort her and joining his own deep voice into that primitive reproach to the gods.

While he sat, howling like the savage he was, he studied the power plant, a squat blockhouse of a place. On the nights the slaves came guards were stationed outside to warn them away. The blockhouse was doubly guarded with the shock-beam. To attempt to take it by force would only mean death for all concerned.

Stark gave that idea up for the time being. There was never a second when escape was not in his thoughts, but he was too old in the game to break his neck against a stone wall. Like Malthor, he would wait.

Zareth and Helvi both changed after Stark's coming. Though they never talked of breaking free, both of them lost their air of hopelessness. Stark made neither plans nor promises. But Helvi knew him from of old, and the girl had her own

subtle understanding, and they held up their heads again.

Then, one "day" as the work was ending, Varra came smiling out of the red murk and beckoned to him, and Stark's heart gave a great leap. Without a backward look he left Helvi and Zareth, and went with her, down the wide still avenue that led outward to the forest.

VIII

THEY LEFT THE STately buildings and the wide spaces behind them, and went in among the trees. Stark hated the forest. The city was bad enough, but it was dead, honestly dead, except for those neat nightmare gardens. There was something terrifying about these great trees, full-leaved and green, rioting with flowering vines and all the rich undergrowth of the jungle, standing like massed corpses made lovely by mortuary art. They swayed and rustled as the coiling fires swept them, branches bending to that silent horrible parody of wind. Stark always felt trapped there, and stifled by the stiff leaves and the vines.

But he went, and Varra slipped like a silver bird between the great trunks, apparently happy.

"I have come here often, ever since I was old enough. It's wonderful. Here I can stoop and fly like one of my own hawks." She laughed and plucked a golden flower to set in her hair, and then darted away again, her white legs flashing.

Stark followed. He could see what she meant. Here in this strange sea one's motion was as much flying as swimming, since the pressure equalized the weight of the body. There was a queer sort of thrill in plunging headlong from the tree-tops, to arrow down through a tangle of vines and branches and then sweep upward again.

She was playing with him, and he knew it. The challenge got his blood up. He could have caught her easily but he did not, only now and again he circled her to show his strength. They sped on and on, trailing wakes of flame, a black hawk chasing a silver dove through the forests of a dream.

But the dove had been fledged in an eagle's nest. Stark wearied of the game at last. He caught her and they clung together, drifting still among the trees with the momentum of that wonderful weightless flight.

Her kiss at first was lazy, teasing and curious. Then it changed. All Stark's smoldering anger leaped into a different kind of flame. His handling of her was rough and cruel, and she laughed, a little fierce voiceless laugh, and gave it back to him, and remembered how he had thought her mouth was like a bitter fruit that would give a man pain when he kissed it.

She broke away at last and came to rest on a broad branch, leaning back against the trunk and laughing, her eyes brilliant and cruel as Stark's own. And Stark sat down at her feet.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "What do you want with me?"

She smiled. There was nothing sidelong or shy about her. She was bold as a new blade.

"I'll tell you, wild man."

He started. "Where did you pick up that name?"

"I have been asking the Earthman Larabee about you. It suits you well." She leaned forward. "This is what I want of you: Slay me Egil and his brother Cond. Also Bor, who will grow up worse than either—although that I can do myself, if you're adverse to killing children, though Bor is more monster than child. Grandmother can't live forever, and with my cousins out of the way she's no threat. Treon doesn't count."

"And if I do—what then?"

"Freedom. And me. You'll rule Shuruun at my side."

Stark's eyes were mocking. "For how long, Varra?"

"Who knows? And what does it matter? The years take care of themselves." She shrugged. "The Lhari blood has run out, and it's time there was a fresh strain. Our children will rule after us, and they'll be men."

Stark laughed. He roared with it.

"It's not enough that I'm a slave to the Lhari. Now I must be executioner and herd bull as well!" He looked at her

keenly. "Why me, Varra? Why pick on me?"

"Because, as I have said, you are the first man I have seen since my father died. Also, there is something about you . . ."

She pushed herself upward to hover lazily, her lips just brushing his.

"Do you think it would be so bad a thing to live with me, wild man?"

She was lovely and maddening, a silver witch shining among the dim fires of the sea, full of wickedness and laughter. Stark reached out and drew her to him.

"Not bad," he murmured. "Dangerous."

He kissed her, and she whispered, "I think you're not afraid of danger."

"On the contrary, I'm a cautious man." He held her off, where he could look straight into her eyes. "I owe Egil something on my own, but I will not murder. The fight must be fair, and Cond will have to take care of himself."

"Fair! Was Egil fair with you—or me?"

He shrugged. "My way, or not at all."

SHE thought it over a while, then nodded. "All right. As for Cond, you will give him a blood debt, and pride will make him fight. The Lhari are all proud," she added bitterly. "That's our curse. But it's bred in the bone, as you'll find out."

"One more thing. Zareth and Helvi are to go free, and there must be an end to this slavery."

She stared at him. "You drive a hard bargain, wild man!"

"Yes or no?"

Yes and no. Zareth and Helvi you may have, if you insist, though the gods know what you see in that pallid child. As to the other . . ." She smiled very mockingly. "I'm no fool, Stark. You're evading me, and two can play that game."

He laughed. "Fair enough. And now tell me this, witch with the silver curls—how am I to get at Egil that I may kill him?"

"I'll arrange that."

She said it with such vicious assurance that he was pretty sure she would arrange

it. He was silent for a moment, and then he asked,

"Varra—what are the Lhari searching for at the bottom of the sea?"

She answered slowly, "I told you that we are a proud clan. We were driven out of the High Plateaus centuries ago because of our pride. Now it's all we have left, but it's a driving thing."

She paused, and then went on. "I think we had known about the city for a long time, but it had never meant anything until my father became fascinated by it. He would stay down here days at a time, exploring, and it was he who found the weapons and the machine of power which is on the island. Then he found the chart and the metal book, hidden away in a secret place. The book was written in pictographs—as though it was meant to be deciphered—and the chart showed the square with the ruined building and the temples, with a separate diagram of catacombs underneath the ground."

"The book told of a secret—a thing of wonder and of fear. And my father believed that the building had been wrecked to close the entrance to the catacombs where the secret was kept. He determined to find it."

Sixteen years of other men's lives. Stark shivered. "What was the secret, Varra?"

"The manner of controlling life. How it was done I do not know, but with it one might build a race of giants, of monsters, or of gods. You can see what that would mean to us, a proud and dying clan."

"Yes," Stark answered slowly. "I can see."

The magnitude of the idea shook him. The builders of the city must have been wise indeed in their scientific research to evolve such a terrible power. To mold the living cells of the body to one's will—to create, not life itself but its form and fashion . . .

A race of giants, or of gods. The Lhari would like that. To transform their own degenerate flesh into something beyond the race of men, to develop their followers into a corps of fighting men that no one could stand against, to see that their children were given an unholy advantage over all

the children of men . . . Stark was appalled at the realization of the evil they could do if they ever found that secret.

Varra said, "There was a warning in the book. The meaning of it was not quite clear, but it seemed that the ancient ones felt that they had sinned against the gods and been punished, perhaps by some plague. They were a strange race, and not human. At any rate, they destroyed the great building there as a barrier against anyone who should come after them, and then let the Red Sea in to cover their city forever. They must have been superstitious children, for all their knowledge."

"Then you all ignored the warning, and never worried that a whole city* had died to prove it."

She shrugged. "Oh, Treon has been muttering prophecies about it for years. Nobody listens to him. As for myself, I don't care whether we find the secret or not. My belief is it was destroyed along with the building, and besides, I have no faith in such things."

"Besides," mocked Stark shrewdly, "you wouldn't care to see Egil and Cond striding across the heavens of Venus, and you're doubtful just what your own place would be in the new pantheon."

She showed her teeth at him. "You're too wise for your own good. And now good bye." She gave him a quick, hard kiss and was gone, flashing upward, high above the tree tops where he dared not follow.

Stark made his way slowly back to the city, upset and very thoughtful.

As he came back into the great square, heading toward the barracks, he stopped, every nerve taut.

Somewhere, in one of the shadowy temples, the clapper of a votive bell was swinging, sending its deep pulsing note across the silence. Slowly, slowly, like the beating of a dying heart it came, and mingled with it was the faint sound of Zareth's voice, calling his name.

IX

HE CROSSED THE SQUARE, moving very carefully through the red murk, and presently he saw her.

It was not hard to find her. There was one temple larger than all the rest. Stark judged that it must once have faced the entrance of the fallen building, as though the great figure within was set to watch over the scientists and the philosophers who came there to dream their vast and sometimes terrible dreams.

The philosophers were gone, and the scientists had destroyed themselves. But the image still watched over the drowned city, its hand raised both in warning and in benediction.

Now, across its reptilian knees, Zareth lay. The temple was open on all sides, and Stark could see her clearly, a little white scrap of humanity against the black unhuman figure.

Malthor stood beside her. It was he who had been tolling the votive bell. He had stopped now, and Zareth's words came clearly to Stark.

"Go away, go away! They're waiting for you. Don't come in here!"

"I'm waiting for you, Stark," Malthor called out, smiling. "Are you afraid to come?" And he took Zareth by the hair and struck her, slowly and deliberately, twice across the face.

All expression left Stark's face, leaving it perfectly blank except for his eyes, which took on a sudden lambent gleam. He began to move toward the temple, not hurrying even then, but moving in such a way that it seemed an army could not have stopped him.

Zareth broke free from her father. Perhaps she was intended to break free.

"Egil!" she screamed. "It's a trap . . ."

Again Malthor caught her and this time he struck her harder, so that she crumpled down again across the image that watched with its jewelled, gentle eyes and saw nothing.

"She's afraid for you," said Malthor. "She knows I mean to kill you if I can. Well, perhaps Egil is here also. Perhaps he is not. But certainly Zareth is here. I have beaten her well, and I shall beat her again, as long as she lives to be beaten, for her treachery to me. And if you want to save her from that, you outlaw dog, you'll have to kill me. Are you afraid?"

Stark was afraid. Malthor and Zareth

were alone in the temple. The pillared colonnades were empty except for the dim fires of the sea. Yet Stark was afraid, for an instinct older than speech warned him to be.

It did not matter. Zareth's white skin was mottled with dark bruises, and Malthor was smiling at him, and it did not matter.

Under the shadow of the roof and down the colonnade he went, swiftly now, leaving a streak of fire behind him. Malthor looked into his eyes, and his smile trembled and was gone.

He crouched. And at the last moment, when the dark body plunged down at him as a shark plunges, he drew a hidden knife from his girdle and struck.

Stark had not counted on that. The slaves were searched for possible weapons every day, and even a sliver of stone was forbidden. Somebody must have given it to him, someone . . .

The thought flashed through his mind while he was in the very act of trying to avoid that death blow. *Too late, too late, because his own momentum carried him onto the point . . .*

Reflexes quicker than any man's, the hair-trigger reactions of a wild thing. Muscles straining, the centre of balance shifted with an awful wrenching effort, hands grasping at the fire-shot redness as though to force it to defy its own laws. The blade ripped a long shallow gash across his breast. But it did not go home. By a fraction of an inch, it did not go home.

While Stark was still off balance, Malthor sprang.

THEY grappled. The knife blade glittered redly, a hungry tongue eager to taste Stark's life. The two men rolled over and over, drifting and tumbling erratically, churning the sea to a froth of sparks, and still the image watched, its calm reptilian features unchangingly benign and wise. Threads of a darker red laced heavily across the dancing fires.

Stark got Malthor's arm under his own and held it there with both hands. His back was to the man now. Malthor kicked and clawed with his feet against the backs

of Stark's thighs, and his left arm came up and tried to clamp around Stark's throat. Stark buried his chin so that it could not, and then Malthor's hand began to tear at Stark's face, searching for his eyes.

Stark voiced a deep bestial sound in his throat. He moved his head suddenly, catching Malthor's hand between his jaws. He did not let go. Presently his teeth were locked against the thumb-joint, and Malthor was screaming, but Stark could give all his attention to what he was doing with the arm that held the knife. His eyes had changed. They were all beast now, the eyes of a killer blazing cold and beautiful in his dark face.

There was a dull crack, and the arm ceased to strain or fight. It bent back upon itself, and the knife fell, drifting quietly down. Malthor was beyond screaming now. He made one effort to get away as Stark released him, but it was a futile gesture, and he made no sound as Stark broke his neck.

He thrust the body from him. It drifted away, moving lazily with the suck of the currents through the colonnade, now and again touching a black pillar as though in casual wonder, wandering out at last into the square. Malthor was in no hurry. He had all eternity before him.

Stark moved carefully away from the girl, who was trying feebly now to sit up on the knees of the image. He called out, to some unseen presence hidden in the shadows under the roof,

"Malthor screamed your name, Egil. Why didn't you come?"

There was a flicker of movement in the intense darkness of the ledge at the top of the pillars.

"Why should I?" asked the Lord Egil of the Lhari. "I offered him his freedom if he could kill you, but it seems he could not—even though I gave him a knife, and drugs to keep your friend Helvi out of the way."

He came out where Stark could see him, very handsome in a tunic of yellow silk, the blunt black weapon in his hands.

"The important thing was to bait a trap. You would not face me because of this—" He raised the weapon. "I might

have killed you as you worked, of course, but my family would have had hard things to say about that. You're a phenomenally good slave."

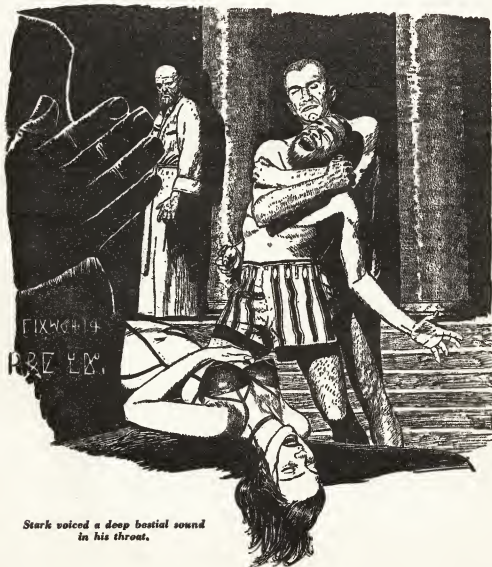
"They'd have said hard words like 'coward', Egil," Stark said softly. "And Varra would have set her bird at you in earnest."

Egil nodded. His lip curved cruelly. "Exactly. That amused you, didn't it? And now my little cousin is training another falcon to swoop at me. She hooded you today, didn't she, Outlander?"

He laughed. "Ah well. I didn't kill

you openly because there's a better way. Do you think I want it gossiped all over the Red Sea that my cousin jilted me for a foreign slave? Do you think I wish it known that I hated you, and why? No. I would have killed Malthor anyway, if you hadn't done it, because he knew. And when I have killed you and the girl I shall take your bodies to the barrier and leave them there together, and it will be obvious to everyone, even Varra, that you were killed trying to escape."

The weapon's muzzle pointed straight at Stark, and Egil's finger quivered on



Stark voiced a deep bestial sound in his throat.

the trigger stud. Full power, this time. Instead of paralysis, death. Stark measured the distance between himself and Egil. He would be dead before he struck, but the impetus of his leap might carry him on, and give Zareth a chance to escape. The muscles of his thighs stirred and tensed.

A voice said, "And it will be obvious how and why *I* died, Egil? For if you kill them, you must kill me too."

WHERE Treon had come from, or when, Stark did not know. But he was there by the image, and his voice was full of a strong music, and his eyes shone with a fey light.

Egil had started, and now he swore in fury. "You idiot! You twisted freak! How did you come here?"

"How does the wind come, and the rain? I am not as other men." He laughed, a sombre sound with no mirth in it. "I am here, Egil, and that's all that matters. And you will not slay this stranger who is more beast than man, and more man than any of us. The gods have a use for him."

He had moved as he spoke, until now he stood between Stark and Egil.

"Get out of the way," said Egil.

Treon shook his head.

"Very well," said Egil. "If you wish to die, you may."

The fey gleam brightened in Treon's eyes. "This is a day of death," he said softly, "but not of his, or mine."

Egil said a short, ugly word, and raised the weapon up.

Things happened very quickly after that. Stark sprang, arching up and over Treon's head, cleaving the red gasses like a burning arrow. Egil started back, and shifted his aim upward, and his finger snapped down on the trigger stud.

Something white came between Stark and Egil, and took the force of the bolt.

Something white. A girl's body, crowned with streaming hair, and a collar of metal glowing bright around the slender neck.

Zareth.

They had forgotten her, the beaten child crouched on the knees of the image. Stark

had moved to keep her out of danger, and she was no threat to the mighty Egil, and Treon's thoughts were known only to himself and the winds that taught him. Unnoticed, she had crept to a place where one last plunge would place her between Stark and death.

The rush of Stark's going took him on over her, except that her hair brushed softly against his skin. Then he was on top of Egil, and it had all been done so swiftly that the Lord of the Lhari had not had time to loose another bolt.

Stark tore the weapon from Egil's hand. He was cold, icy cold, and there was a strange blindness on him, so that he could see nothing clearly but Egil's face. And it was Stark who screamed this time, a dreadful sound like the cry of a great cat gone beyond reason or fear.

Treon stood watching. He watched the blood stream darkly into the sea, and he listened to the silence come, and he saw the thing that had been his cousin drift away on the slow tide, and it was as though he had seen it all before and was not surprised.

Stark went to Zareth's body. The girl was still breathing, very faintly, and her eyes turned to Stark, and she smiled.

Stark was blind now with tears. All his rage had run out of him with Egil's blood, leaving nothing but an aching pity and a sadness, and a wondering awe. He took Zareth very tenderly into his arms and held her, dumbly, watching the tears fall on her upturned face. And presently he knew that she was dead.

Sometime later Treon came to him and said softly, "To this end she was born, and she knew it, and was happy. Even now she smiles. And she should, for she had a better death than most of us." He laid his hand on Stark's shoulder. "Come, I'll show you where to put her. She will be safe there, and tomorrow you can bury her where she would wish to be."

Stark rose and followed him, bearing Zareth in his arms.

Treon went to the pedestal on which the image sat. He pressed in a certain way upon a series of hidden springs, and a section of the paving slid noiselessly back, revealing stone steps leading down.

X

TREON LED THE WAY DOWN, into darkness that was lightened only by the dim fires they themselves woke in passing. No currents ran here. The red gas lay dull and stagnant, closed within the walls of a square passage built of the same black stone.

"These are the crypts," he said. "The labyrinth that is shown on the chart my father found." And he told about the chart, as Varra had.

He led the way surely, his misshapen body moving without hesitation past the mouths of branching corridors and the doors of chambers whose interiors were lost in shadow.

"The history of the city is here. All the books and the learning, that they had not the heart to destroy. There are no weapons. They were not a warlike people, and I think that the force we of the Lhari have used differently was defensive only, protection against the beasts and the raiding primitives of the swamps."

With a great effort, Stark wrenched his thoughts away from the light burden he carried.

"I thought," he said dully, "that the crypts were under the wrecked building."

"So we all thought. We were intended to think so. That is why the building was wrecked. And for sixteen years we of the Lhari have killed men and women with dragging the stones of it away. But the temple was shown also in the chart. We thought it was there merely as a landmark, an identification for the great building. But I began to wonder . . ."

"How long have you known?"

"Not long. Perhaps two rains. It took many seasons to find the secret of this passage. I came here at night, when the others slept."

"And you didn't tell?"

"No!" said Treon. "You are thinking that if I had told, there would have been an end to the slavery and the death. But what then? My family, turned loose with the power to destroy a world, as this city was destroyed? No! It was better for the slaves to die."

3—Planet—Fall

He motioned Stark aside, then, between doors of gold that stood ajar, into a vault so great that there was no guessing its size in the red and shrouding gloom.

"This was the burial place of their kings," said Treon softly. "Leave the little one here."

Stark looked around him, still too numb to feel awe, but impressed even so.

They were set in straight lines, the beds of black marble—lines so long that there was no end to them except the limit of vision. And on them slept the old kings, their bodies, marvelously embalmed, covered with silken palls, their hands crossed upon their breasts, their wise unhuman faces stamped with the mark of peace.

Very gently, Stark laid Zareth down on a marble couch, and covered her also with silk, and closed her eyes and folded her hands. And it seemed to him that her face, too, had that look of peace.

He went out with Treon, thinking that none of them had earned a better place in the hall of kings than Zareth.

"Treon," he said.

"Yes?"

"That prophecy you spoke when I came to the castle—I will bear it out."

Treon nodded. "That is the way of prophecies."

He did not return toward the temple, but led the way deeper into the heart of the catacombs. A great excitement burned within him, a bright and terrible thing that communicated itself to Stark. Treon had suddenly taken on the stature of a figure of destiny, and the Earthman had the feeling that he was in the grip of some current that would plunge on irresistibly until everything in its path was swept away. Stark's flesh quivered.

THEY reached the end of the corridor at last. And there, in the red gloom, a shape sat waiting before a black, barred door. A shape grotesque and incredibly misshapen, so horribly malformed that by it Treon's crippled body appeared almost beautiful. Yet its face was as the faces of the images and the old kings, and its sunken eyes had once held wisdom, and one of its seven-fingered hands were still slim and sensitive.

Stark recoiled. The thing made him physically sick, and he would have turned away, but Treon urged him on.

"Go closer. It is dead, embalmed, but it has a message for you. It has waited all this time to give that message."

Reluctantly, Stark went forward.

Quite suddenly, it seemed that the thing spoke.

Behold me. Look upon me, and take counsel before you grasp that power which lies beyond the door!

Stark leaped back, crying out, and Treon smiled.

"It was so with me. But I have listened to it many times since then. It speaks not with a voice, but within the mind, and only when one has passed a certain spot."

Stark's reasoning mind pondered over that. A thought-record, obviously, triggered off by an electronic beam. The ancients had taken good care that their warning would be heard and understood by anyone who should solve the riddle of the catacombs. Thought-images, speaking directly to the brain, know no barrier of time or language.

He stepped forward again, and once more the telepathic voice spoke to him.

"We tampered with the secrets of the gods. We intended no evil. It was only that we love perfection, and wished to shape all living things as flawless as our buildings and our gardens. We did not know that it was against the Law . . .

"I was one of those who found the way to change the living cell. We used the unseen force that comes from the Land of the Gods beyond the sky, and we so harnessed it that we could build from the living flesh as the potter builds from the clay. We healed the halt and the maimed, and made those stand tall and straight who came crooked from the egg, and for a time we were as brothers to the gods themselves. I myself, even I, knew the glory of perfection. And then came the reckoning.

"The cell, once made to change, would not stop changing. The growth was slow, and for a while we did not notice it, but when we did it was too late. We were becoming a city of monsters. And the

force we had used was worse than useless, for the more we tried to mould the monstrous flesh to its normal shape, the more the stimulated cells grew and grew, until the bodies we laboured over were like things of wet mud that flow and change even as you look at them.

"One by one the people of the city destroyed themselves. And those of us who were left realized the judgment of the gods, and our duty. We made all things ready, and let the Red Sea hide us forever from our own kind, and those who should come after.

"Yet we did not destroy our knowledge. Perhaps it was our pride only that forbade us, but we could not bring ourselves to do it. Perhaps other gods, other races wiser than we, can take away the evil and keep only the good. For it is good for all creatures to be, if not perfect, at least strong and sound.

"But heed this warning, whoever you may be that listen. If your gods are jealous, if your people have not the wisdom or the knowledge to succeed where we failed in controlling this force, then touch it not! Or you, and all your people, will become as I."

THE voice stopped. Stark moved back again, and said to Treon incredulously, "And your family would ignore that warning?"

Treon laughed. "They are fools. They are cruel and greedy and very proud. They would say that this was a lie to frighten away intruders, or that human flesh would not be subject to the laws that govern the flesh of reptiles. They would say anything, because they have dreamed this dream too long to be denied."

Stark shuddered and looked at the black door. "The thing ought to be destroyed."

"Yes," said Treon softly.

His eyes were shining, looking into some private dream of his own. He started forward, and when Stark would have gone with him he thrust him back, saying, "No. You have no part in this." He shook his head.

"I have waited," he whispered, almost to himself. "The winds bade me wait, until the day was ripe to fall from the

tree of death. I have waited, and at dawn I knew, for the wind said, *Now is the gathering of the fruit at hand.*"

He looked suddenly at Stark, and his eyes had in them a clear sanity, for all their feyness.

"You heard, Stark. 'We made those stand tall and straight who came crooked from the egg'. I will have my hour. I will stand as a man for the little time that is left."

He turned, and Stark made no move to follow. He watched Treon's twisted body recede, white against the red dusk, until it passed the monstrous watcher and came to the black door. The long thin arms reached up and pushed the bar away.

The door swung slowly back. Through the opening Stark glimpsed a chamber that held a structure of crystal rods and discs mounted on a frame of metal, the whole thing glowing and glittering with a restless bluish light that dimmed and brightened as though it echoed some vast pulse-beat. There was other apparatus, intricate banks of tubes and condensers, but this was the heart of it, and the heart was still alive.

Treon passed within and closed the door behind him.

Stark drew back some distance from the door and its guardian, crouched down, and set his back against the wall. He thought about the apparatus. Cosmic rays, perhaps—the unseen force that came from beyond the sky. Even yet, all their potentialities were not known. But a few luckless spacemen had found that under certain conditions they could do amazing things to human tissue.

It was a line of thought Stark did not like at all. He tried to keep his mind away from Treon entirely. He tried not to think at all. It was dark there in the corridor, and very still, and the shapeless horror sat quiet in the doorway and waited with him. Stark began to shiver, a shallow animal-twitching of the flesh.

He waited. After a while he thought Treon must be dead, but he did not move. He did not wish to go into that room to see.

He waited.

Suddenly he leaped up, cold sweat bursting out all over him. A crash had

echoed down the corridor, a clashing of shattered crystal and a high singing note that trailed off into nothing.

The door opened.

A man came out. A man tall and straight and beautiful as an angel, a strong-limbed man with Treon's face, Treon's tragic eyes. And behind him the chamber was dark. The pulsing heart of power had stopped.

The door was shut and barred again. Treon's voice was saying, "There are records left, and much of the apparatus, so that the secret is not lost entirely. Only it is out of reach."

He came to Stark and held out his hand. "Let us fight together, as men. And do not fear. I shall die, long before this body changes." He smiled, the remembered smile that was full of pity for all living things. "I know, for the winds have told me."

Stark took his hand and held it.

"Good," said Treon. "And now lead on, stranger with the fierce eyes. For the prophecy is yours, and the day is yours, and I who have crept about like a snail all my life know little of battles. Lead, and I will follow."

Stark fingered the collar around his neck. "Can you rid me of this?"

Treon nodded. "There are tools and acid in one of the chambers."

He found them, and worked swiftly, and while he worked Stark thought, smiling—and there was no pity in that smile at all.

They came back at last into the temple, and Treon closed the entrance to the catacombs. It was still night, for the square was empty of slaves. Stark found Egil's weapon where it had fallen, on the ledge where Egil died.

"We must hurry," said Stark. "Come on."

• XI

THE ISLAND WAS SHROUDED heavily in mist and the blue darkness of the night. Stark and Treon crept silently among the rocks until they could see the glimmer of torchlight through the window-slits of the power station.

There were seven guards, five inside the blockhouse, two outside to patrol.

When they were close enough, Stark slipped away, going like a shadow, and never a pebble turned under his bare foot. Presently he found a spot to his liking and crouched down. A sentry went by not three feet away, yawning and looking hopelessly at the sky for the first signs of dawn.

Treon's voice rang out, the sweet unmistakable voice. "Ho, there, guards!"

The sentry stopped and whirled around. Off around the curve of the stone wall someone began to run, his sandals thudding on the soft ground, and the second guard came up.

"Who speaks?" one demanded. "The Lord Treon?"

They peered into the darkness, and Treon answered, "Yes." He had come forward far enough so that they could make out the pale blur of his face, keeping his body out of sight among the rocks and the shrubs that sprang up between them.

"Make haste," he ordered. "Bid them open the door, there." He spoke in breathless jerks, as though spent. "A tragedy—a disaster! Bid them open!"

One of the men leaped to obey, hammering on the massive door that was kept barred from the inside. The other stood goggle-eyed, watching. Then the door opened, spilling a flood of yellow torch-light into the red fog.

"What is it?" cried the men inside. "What has happened?"

"Come out!" gasped Treon. "My cousin is dead, the Lord Egil is dead, murdered by a slave."

He let that sink in. Three or more men came outside into the circle of light, and their faces were frightened, as though somehow they feared they might be held responsible for this thing.

"You know him," said Treon. "The great black-haired one from Earth. He has slain the Lord Egil and got away into the forest, and we need all extra guards to go after him, since many must be left to guard the other slaves, who are mutinous. You, and you—" He picked out the four biggest ones. "Go at once and join the search. I will stay here with the others."

It nearly worked. The four took a hesitant step or two, and then one paused and said doubtfully,

"But, my lord, it is forbidden that we leave our posts, for any reason. Any reason at all, my lord! The Lord Cond would slay us if we left this place."

"And you fear the Lord Cond more than you do me," said Treon philosophically. "Ah, well. I understand."

He stepped out, full into the light.

A gasp went up, and then a startled yell. The three men from inside had come out armed only with swords, but the two sentries had their shock-weapons. One of them shrieked,

"It is a demon, who speaks with Treon's voice!"

And the two black weapons started up.

Behind them, Stark fired two silent bolts in quick succession, and the men fell, safely out of the way for hours. Then he leaped for the door.

He collided with two men who were doing the same thing. The third had turned to hold Treon off with his sword until they were safely inside.

Seeing that Treon, who was unarmed, was in danger of being spitted on the man's point, Stark fired between the two lunging bodies as he fell, and brought the guard down. Then he was involved in a thrashing tangle of arms and legs, and a lucky blow jarred the shock-weapon out of his hand.

Treon added himself to the fray. Pleasuring in his new strength, he caught one man by the neck and pulled him off. The guards were big men, and powerful, and they fought desperately. Stark was bruised and bleeding from a cut mouth before he could get in a finishing blow.

Someone rushed past him into the doorway. Treon yelled. Out of the tail of his eyes Stark saw the Lhari sitting dazed on the ground. The door was closing.

Stark hunched up his shoulders and sprang.

HE HIT the heavy panel with a jar that nearly knocked him breathless. It slammed open, and there was a cry of pain and the sound of someone falling. Stark burst through, to find the last of

the guards rolling every which way over the floor. But one rolled over onto his feet again, drawing his sword as he rose. He had not had time before.

Stark continued his rush without stopping. He plunged headlong into the man before the point was clear of the scabbard, bore him over and down, and finished the man off with savage efficiency.

He leaped to his feet, breathing hard, spitting blood out of his mouth, and looked around the control room. But the others had fled, obviously to raise the warning.

The mechanism was simple. It was contained in a large black metal oblong about the size and shape of a coffin, equipped with grids and lenses and dials. It hummed softly to itself, but what its source of power was Stark did not know. Perhaps those same cosmic rays, harnessed to a different use.

He closed what seemed to be a master switch, and the humming stopped, and the flickering light died out of the lenses. He picked up the slain guard's sword and carefully wrecked everything that was breakable. Then he went outside again.

Treon was standing up, shaking his head. He smiled ruefully.

"It seems that strength alone is not enough," he said. "One must have skill as well."

"The barriers are down," said Stark. "The way is clear."

Treon nodded, and went with him back into the sea. This time both carried shock weapons taken from the guards—six in all, with Egil's. Total armament for war.

As they forged swiftly through the red depths, Stark asked, "What of the people of Shuruun? How will they fight?"

Treon answered, "Those of Malthor's breed will stand for the Lhari. They must, for all their hope is there. The others will wait, until they see which side is safest. They would rise against the Lhari if they dared, for we have brought them only fear in their lifetimes. But they will wait, and see."

Stark nodded. He did not speak again.

They passed over the brooding city, and Stark thought of Egil and of Malthor who were part of that silence now, drifting slowly through the empty streets where

the little currents took them, wrapped in their shrouds of dim fire.

He thought of Zareth sleeping in the hall of kings, and his eyes held a cold, cruel light.

They swooped down over the slave barracks. Treon remained on watch outside. Stark went in, taking with him the extra weapons.

The slaves still slept. Some of them dreamed, and moaned in their dreaming, and others might have been dead, with their hollow faces white as skulls.

Slaves. One hundred and four, counting the women.

Stark shouted out to them, and they woke, starting up on their pallets, their eyes full of terror. Then they saw who it was that called them, standing collarless and armed, and there was a great surging and a clamour that stilled as Stark shouted again, demanding silence. This time Helvi's voice echoed his. The tall barbarian had wakened from his drugged sleep.

Stark told them, very briefly, all that happened.

"You are freed from the collar," he said. "This day you can survive or die as men, and not slaves." He paused, then asked, "Who will go with me into Shuruun?"

They answered with one voice, the voice of the Lost Ones, who saw the red pall of death begin to lift from over them. The Lost Ones, who had found hope again.

Stark laughed. He was happy. He gave the extra weapons to Helvi and three others that he chose, and Helvi looked into his eyes and laughed too.

Treon spoke from the open door. "They are coming!"

STARK gave Helvi quick instructions and darted out, taking with him one of the other men. With Treon, they hid among the shrubbery of the garden that was outside the hall, patterned and beautiful, swaying its lifeless brilliance in the lazy drifts of fire.

The guards came. Twenty of them, tall armed men, to turn out the slaves for another period of labour, dragging the useless stones.



And the hidden weapons spoke with their silent tongues.

Eight of the guards fell inside the hall. Nine of them went down outside. Ten of the slaves died with blazing collars before the remaining three were overcome.

Now there were twenty swords among ninety-four slaves, counting the women.

They left the city and rose up over the dreaming forest, a flight of white ghosts with flames in their hair, coming back from the red dusk and the silence to find the light again.

Light, and vengeance.

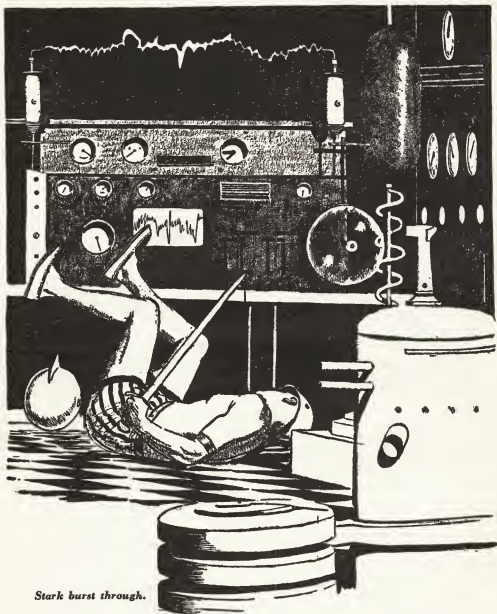
The first pale glimmer of dawn was sifting through the clouds as they came up among the rocks below the castle of the Lhari. Stark left them and went like a

shadow up the tumbled cliffs to where he had hidden his gun on the night he had first come to Shuruun. Nothing stirred. The fog lifted up from the sea like a vapour of blood, and the face of Venus was still dark. Only the high clouds were touched with pearl.

Stark returned to the others. He gave one of his shock-weapons to a swamp-lander with a cold madness in his eyes. Then he spoke a few final words to Helvi and went back with Treon under the surface of the sea.

Treon led the way. He went along the face of the submerged cliff, and presently he touched Stark's arm and pointed to where a round mouth opened in the rock.

"It was made long ago," said Treon,



Stark burst through.

"so that the Lhari and their slavers might come and go and not be seen. Come—and be very quiet."

They swam into the tunnel mouth, and down the dark way that lay beyond, until the lift of the floor brought them out of the sea. Then they felt their way silently along, stopping now and again to listen.

Surprise was their only hope. Treon had said that with the two of them they might succeed. More men would surely

be discovered, and meet a swift end at the hands of the guards.

Stark hoped Treon was right.

They came to a blank wall of dressed stone. Treon leaned his weight against one side, and a great block swung slowly around on a central pivot. Guttering torchlight came through the crack. By it Stark could see that the room beyond was empty.

They stepped through, and as they did

so a servant in bright silks came yawning into the room with a fresh torch to replace the one that was dying.

He stopped in mid-step, his eyes widening. He dropped the torch. His mouth opened to shape a scream, but no sound came, and Stark remembered that these servants were tongueless—to prevent them from telling what they saw or heard in the castle, Treon said.

The man spun about and fled, down a long dim-lit hall. Stark ran him down without effort. He struck once with the barrel of his gun, and the man fell and was still.

Treon came up. His face had a look almost of exaltation, a queer shining of the eyes that made Stark shiver. He led on, through a series of empty rooms, all sombre black, and they met no one else for a while.

He stopped at last before a small door of burnished gold. He looked at Stark once, and nodded, and thrust the panels open and stepped through.

XII

THEY STOOD INSIDE THE vast echoing hall that stretched away into darkness until it seemed there was no end to it. The cluster of silver lamps burned as before, and within their circle of radiance the Lhari started up from their places and stared at the strangers who had come in through their private door.

Cond, and Arel with her hands idle in her lap. Bor, pummelling the little dragon to make it hiss and snap, laughing at its impotence. Varra, stroking the winged creature on her wrist, testing with her white finger the sharpness of its beak. And the old woman, with a scrap of fat meat halfway to her mouth.

They had stopped, frozen, in the midst of these actions. And Treon walked slowly into the light.

"Do you know me?" he said.

A strange shivering ran through them. Now, as before, the old woman spoke first, her eyes glittering with a look as rapacious as her appetite.

"You are Treon," she said, and her whole vast body shook.

The name went crying and whispering off around the dark walls, *Treon! Treon! Treon!* Cond leaped forward, touching his cousin's straight strong body with hands that trembled.

"You have found it," he said. "The secret."

"Yes." Treon lifted his silver head and laughed, a beautiful ringing bell-note that sang from the echoing corners. "I found it, and it's gone, smashed, beyond your reach forever. Egil is dead, and the day of the Lhari is done."

There was a long, long silence, and then the old woman whispered, "*You lie!*"

Treon turned to Stark.

"Ask him, the stranger who came bearing doom upon his forehead. Ask him if I lie."

Cond's face became something less than human. He made a queer crazed sound and flung himself at Treon's throat.

Bor screamed suddenly. He alone was not much concerned with the finding or the losing of the secret, and he alone seemed to realize the significance of Stark's presence. He screamed, looking at the big dark man, and went rushing off down the hall, crying for the guard as he went, and the echoes roared and racketed. He fought open the great doors and ran out, and as he did so the sound of fighting came through from the compound.

The slaves, with their swords and clubs, with their stones and shards of rock, had come over the wall from the cliffs.

Stark had moved forward, but Treon did not need his help. He had got his hands around Cond's throat, and he was smiling. Stark did not disturb him.

The old woman was talking, cursing, commanding, choking on her own apoplectic breath. Arel began to laugh. She did not move, and her hands remained limp and open in her lap. She laughed and laughed, and Varra looked at Stark and hated him.

"You're a fool, wild man," she said. "You would not take what I offered you, so you shall have nothing—only death."

She slipped the hood from her creature and set it straight at Stark. Then she drew a knife from her girdle and plunged it into Treon's side.

TREON reeled back. His grip loosened and Cond tore away, half throttled, raging, his mouth flecked with foam. He drew his short sword and staggered in upon Treon.

Furious wings beat and thundered around Stark's head, and talons were clawing for his eyes. He reached up with his left hand and caught the brute by one leg and held it. Not long, but long enough to get one clear shot at Cond that dropped him in his tracks. Then he snapped the falcon's neck.

He flung the creature at Varra's feet, and picked up the gun again. The guards were rushing into the hall now at the lower end, and he began to fire at them.

Treon was sitting on the floor. Blood was coming in a steady trickle from his side, but he had the shock-weapon in his hands, and he was still smiling.

There was a great boiling roar of noise from outside. Men were fighting there, killing, dying, screaming their triumph or their pain. The echoes raged within the hall, and the noise of Stark's gun was like a hissing thunder. The guards, armed only with swords, went down like ripe wheat before the sickle, but there were many of them, too many for Stark and Treon to hold for long.

The old woman shrieked and shrieked, and was suddenly still.

Helvi burst in through the press, with a knot of collared slaves. The fight dissolved into a whirling chaos. Stark threw his gun away. He was afraid now of hitting his own men. He caught up a sword from a fallen guard and began to hew his way to the barbarian.

Suddenly Treon cried his name. He leaped aside, away from the man he was fighting, and saw Varra fall with the dagger still in her hand. She had come up behind him to stab, and Treon had seen and pressed the trigger stud just in time.

For the first time, there were tears in Treon's eyes.

A sort of sickness came over Stark. There was something horrible in this spectacle of a family destroying itself. He was too much the savage to be sentimental over Varra, but all the same he could not bear to look at Treon for a while.

Presently he found himself back to back with Helvi, and as they swung their swords—the shock weapons had been discarded for the same reason as Stark's gun—Helvi panted,

"It has been a good fight, my brother! We cannot win, but we can have a good death, which is better than slavery!"

It looked as though Helvi was right. The slaves, unfortunately, weakened by their long confinement, worn out by overwork, were being beaten back. The tide turned, and Stark was swept with it out into the compound, fighting stubbornly.

The great gate stood open. Beyond it stood the people of Shuruun, watching, hanging back—as Treon had said, they would wait and see.

In the forefront, leaning on his stick, stood Larrabee the Earthman.

Stark cut his way free of the press. He leaped up onto the wall and stood there, breathing hard, sweating, bloody, with a dripping sword in his hand. He waved it, shouting down to the men of Shuruun.

"What are you waiting for, you scuts, you women? The Lhari are dead, the Lost Ones are freed—must we of Earth do all your work for you?"

And he looked straight at Larrabee.

Larrabee stared back, his dark suffering eyes full of a bitter mirth. "Oh, well," he said in English. "Why not?"

He threw back his head and laughed, and the bitterness was gone. He voiced a high, shrill rebel yell and lifted his stick like a cudgel, limping toward the gate, and the men of Shuruun gave tongue and followed him.

After that, it was soon over.

THEY found Bor's body in the stable pens, where he had fled to hide when the fighting started. The dragons, maddened by the smell of the blood, had slain him very quickly.

Helvi had come through alive, and Larrabee, who had kept himself carefully out of harm's way after he had started the men of Shuruun on their attack. Nearly half the slaves were dead, and the rest wounded. Of those who had served the Lhari, few were left.

Stark went back into the great hall. He walked slowly, for he was very weary, and where he set his foot there was a bloody print, and his arms were red to the elbows, and his breast was splashed with the redness. Treon watched him come, and smiled, nodding.

"It is as I said. And I have outlived them all."

Arel had stopped laughing at last. She had made no move to run away, and the tide of battle had rolled over her and drowned her unaware. The old woman lay still, a mountain of inert flesh upon her bed. Her hand still clutched a ripe fruit, clutched convulsively in the moment of death, the red juice dripping through her fingers.

"Now I am going, too," said Treon, "and I am well content. With me goes the last of our rotten blood, and Venus will be the cleaner for it. Bury my body deep, stranger with the fierce eyes. I would not have it looked on after this."

He sighed and fell forward.

Bor's little dragon crept whimpering out from its hiding place under the old woman's bed and scurried away down the hall, trailing its dragging rope.

STARK leaned on the taffrail, watching the dark mass of Shuruun recede into the red mists.

The decks were crowded with the outland slaves, going home. The Lhari were gone, the Lost Ones freed forever, and Shuruun was now only another port on the Red Sea. Its people would still be wolf's-heads and pirates, but that was natural and as it should be. The black evil was gone.

Stark was glad to see the last of it. He would be glad also to see the last of the Red Sea.

The off-shore wind set the ship briskly down the gulf. Stark thought of Larrabee, left behind with his dreams of winter snows and city streets and women with dainty feet. It seemed that he had lived too long in Shuruun, and had lost the courage to leave it.

"Poor Larrabee," he said to Helvi, who

was standing near him. "He'll die in the mud, still cursing it."

Someone laughed behind him. He heard a limping step on the deck and turned to see Larrabee coming toward him.

"Changed my mind at the last minute," Larrabee said. "I've been below, lest I should see my muddy brats and be tempted to change it again." He leaned beside Stark, shaking his head. "Ah, well, they'll do nicely without me. I'm an old man, and I've a right to choose my own place to die in. I'm going back to Earth, with you."

Stark glanced at him. "I'm not going to Earth."

Larrabee sighed. "No. No, I suppose you're not. After all, you're no Earthman, really, except for an accident of blood. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Away from Venus, but I don't know yet where."

Larrabee's dark eyes surveyed him shrewdly. "'A restless, cold-eyed tiger of a man', that's what Varra said. He's lost something, she said. He'll look for it all his life, and never find it."

After that there was silence. The red fog wrapped them, and the wind rose and sent them scudding before it.

Then, faint and far off, there came a moaning wail, a sound like broken chanting that turned Stark's flesh cold.

All on board heard it. They listened, utterly silent, their eyes wide, and somewhere a woman began to weep.

Stark shook himself. "It's only the wind," he said roughly, "in the rocks by the strait."

The sound rose and fell, weary, infinitely mournful, and the part of Stark that was N'Chaka said that he lied. It was not the wind that keened so sadly through the mists. It was the voices of the Lost Ones who were forever lost—Zareth, sleeping in the hall of kings, and all the others who would never leave the dreaming city and the forest, never find the light again.

Stark shivered, and turned away, watching the leaping fires of the strait sweep toward them.



"It is enough for you to know that you must die."

THE GIANTS RETURN

By ROBERT ABERNATHY

Earth set itself grimly to meet them with corrosive fire, determined to blast them back to the stars. But they erred in thinking the Old Ones were too big to be clever.

IN THE LAST HOURS THE STAR ahead had grown brighter by many magnitudes, and had changed its color from a dazzling blue through white to the

normal yellow, of a GO sun. That was the Doppler effect as the star's radial velocity changed relative to the *Quest III*, as for forty hours the ship had decelerated.

They had seen many such stars come near out of the galaxy's glittering backdrop, and had seen them dwindle, turn red and go out as the *Quest III* drove on its way once more, lashed by despair toward the speed of light, leaving behind the mockery of yet another solitary and lifeless luminary unaccompanied by worlds where men might dwell. They had grown sated with the sight of wonders—of multiple systems of giant stars, of nebulae that sprawled in empty flame across light years.

But now unwonted excitement possessed the hundred-odd members of the *Quest III's* crew. It was a subdued excitement; men and women, they came and stood quietly gazing into the big vision screens that showed the oncoming star, and there were wide-eyed children who had been born in the ship and had never seen a planet. The grownups talked in low voices, in tones of mingled eagerness and apprehension, of what might lie at the long journey's end. For the *Quest III* was coming home; the sun ahead was *the* Sun, whose rays had warmed their lives' beginning.

KNOF LLUD, the *Quest III's* captain, came slowly down the narrow stair from the observatory, into the big rotunda that was now the main recreation room, where most of the people gathered. The great chamber, a full cross-section of the vessel, had been at first a fuel hold. At the voyage's beginning eighty per cent of the fifteen-hundred-foot cylinder had been engines and fuel; but as the immense stores were spent and the holds became radioactively safe, the crew had spread out from its original cramped quarters. Now the interstellar ship was little more than a hollow shell.

Eyes lifted from the vision screens to interrogate Knof Llud; he met them with an impassive countenance, and announced quietly, "We've sighted Earth."

A feverish buzz arose; the captain gestured for silence and went on, "It is still only a featureless disk to the telescope. Zost Relyul has identified it—no more."

But this time the clamor was not to be settled. People pressed round the screens, peering into them as if with the naked

eye they could pick out the atom of reflected light that was Earth, home. They wrung each other's hands, kissed, shouted, wept. For the present their fears were forgotten and exaltation prevailed.

Knof Llud smiled wryly. The rest of the little speech he had been about to make didn't matter anyway, and it might have spoiled this moment.

He turned to go, and was halted by the sight of his wife, standing at his elbow. His wry smile took on warmth; he asked, "How do you feel, Lesra?"

She drew an uncertain breath and released it in a faint sigh. "I don't know. It's good that Earth's still there." She was thinking, he judged shrewdly, of Knof Jr. and Delza, who save from pictures could not remember sunlit skies or grassy fields or woods in summer . . .

He said, with a touch of tolerant amusement, "What did you think might have happened to Earth? After all, it's only been nine hundred years."

"That's just it," said Lesra shakily. "Nine hundred years have gone by—*there*—and nothing will be the same. It won't be the same world we left, the world we knew and fitted in . . ."

The captain put an arm round her with comforting pressure. "Don't worry. Things may have changed—but we'll manage." But his face had hardened against registering the gnawing of that same doubtful fear within him. He let his arm fall. "I'd better get up to the bridge. There's a new course to be set now—for Earth."

He left her and began to climb the stairway again. Someone switched off the lights, and a charmed whisper ran through the big room as the people saw each other's faces by the pale golden light of Earth's own Sun, mirrored and multiplied by the screens. In that light Lesra's eyes gleamed with unshed tears.

Captain Llud found Navigator Gwar Den looking as smug as the cat that ate the canary. Gwar Den was finding that the actual observed positions of the planets thus far located agreed quite closely with his extrapolations from long unused charts of the Solar System. He had already set up on the calculator a course that would carry them to Earth.

Llud nodded curt approval, remarking, "Probably we'll be intercepted before we get that far."

Den was jolted out of his happy abstraction. "Uh, Captain," he said hesitantly. "What kind of a reception do you suppose we'll get?"

Llud shook his head slowly. "Who knows? We don't know whether any of the other *Quests* returned successful, or if they returned at all. And we don't know what changes have taken place on Earth. It's possible—not likely, though—that something has happened to break civilization's continuity to the point where our expedition has been forgotten altogether."

HE TURNED away grim-lipped and left the bridge. From his private office-cabin, he sent a message to Chief Astronomer Zost Relyul to notify him as soon as Earth's surface features became clear; then he sat idle, alone with his thoughts.

The ship's automatic mechanisms had scant need of tending; Knof Llud found himself wishing that he could find some back-breaking task for everyone on board, himself included, to fill up the hours that remained.

There was an extensive and well-chosen film library in the cabin, but he couldn't persuade himself to kill time that way. He could go down and watch the screens, or to the family apartment where he might find Lesra and the children—but somehow he didn't want to do that either.

He felt empty, drained—like his ship. As the *Quest III's* fuel stores and the hope of success in man's mightiest venture had dwindled, so the strength had gone out of him. Now the last fuel compartment was almost empty and Captain Knof Llud felt tired and old.

Perhaps, he thought, he was feeling the weight of his nine hundred Earth years—though physically he was only forty now, ten years older than when the voyage had begun. That was the foreshortening along the time axis of a space ship approaching the speed of light. Weeks and months had passed for the *Quest III* in interstellar flight while years and decades had raced by on the home world.

Bemusedly Llud got to his feet and

stood surveying a cabinet with built-in voice recorder and pigeonholes for records. There were about three dozen film spools there—his personal memoirs of the great expedition, a segment of his life and of history. He might add that to the ship's official log and its collections of scientific data, as a report to whatever powers might be on Earth now—if such powers were still interested.

Llud selected a spool from among the earliest. It was one he had made shortly after leaving Procyon, end of the first leg of the trip. He slid it onto the reproducer.

His own voice came from the speaker, fresher, more vibrant and confident than he knew it was now.

"One light-day out from Procyon, the thirty-third day by ship's time since leaving Earth.

"Our visit to Procyon drew blank. There is only one huge planet, twice the size of Jupiter, and like Jupiter utterly unfit to support a colony.

"Our hopes were dashed—and I think all of us, even remembering the Centaurus Expedition's failure, hoped more than we cared to admit. If Procyon had possessed a habitable planet, we could have returned after an absence of not much over twenty years Earth time.

"It is cheering to note that the crew seems only more resolute. We go on to Capella; its spectrum, so like our own Sun's, beckons. If success comes there, a century will have passed before we can return to Earth; friends, relatives, all the generation that launched the *Quest* ships will be long since dead. Nevertheless we go on. Our generation's dream, humanity's dream, lives in us and in the ship forever . . ."

Presently Knof Llud switched off that younger voice of his and leaned back, an ironic smile touching his lips. That fervent idealism seemed remote and foreign to him now. The fanfares of departure must still have been ringing in his ears.

He rose, slipped the record back in its niche and picked out another, later, one.

"One week since we passed close enough to Aldebaran to ascertain that that system, too, is devoid of planets.

"We face the unpleasant realization that what was feared is probably true—that worlds such as the Sun's are a rare accident, and that we may complete our search without finding even one new Earth.

"It makes no difference, of course; we cannot betray the plan . . . This may be man's last chance of escaping his pitiful limitation to one world in all the Universe. Certainly the building of this ship and its two sisters, the immense expenditure of time and labor and energy stores that went into them, left Earth's economy drained and exhausted. Only once in a long age does mankind rise to such a selfless and transcendent effort—the effort of Egypt that built the pyramids, or the war efforts of the nations in the last great conflicts of the twentieth century.

"Looked at historically, such super-human outbursts of energy are the result of a population's outgrowing its room and resources, and therefore signalize the beginning of the end. Population can be limited, but the price is a deadly frustration, because growth alone is life . . . In our day the end of man's room for growth on the Earth was in sight—so we launched the *Quests*. Perhaps our effort will prove as futile as pyramid-building, less practical than orgies of slaughter to reduce pressure . . . In any case, it would be impossible to transport very many people to other stars; but Earth could at least go into its decline with the knowledge that its race went onward and upward, expanding limitlessly into the Universe . . .

"Hopeless, unless we find planets!"

KNOF LLUD shook his head sorrowfully and took off the spool. That was from the time when he had grown philosophical after the first disappointments.

He frowned thoughtfully, choosing one more spool that was only four years old. The recorded voice sounded weary, yet alive with a strange longing . . .

"We are in the heart of Pleiades; a hundred stars show brilliant on the screens, each star encircled by a misty halo like lights glowing through fog, for we are traversing a vast diffuse nebula.

"According to plan, the *Quest III* has reached its furthest point from Earth.

Now we turn back along a curve that will take us past many more stars and stellar systems—but hope is small that any of those will prove a home for man, as have none of the thousands of stars examined already.

"But what are a few thousand stars in a galaxy of billions? We have only, as it were, visited a handful of the outlying villages of the Universe, while the lights of its great cities still blaze far ahead along the Milky Way.

"On flimsy excuses I have had Zost Relyul make observations of the globular cluster Omega Centauri. There are a hundred thousand stars there in a volume of space where one finds a few dozen in the Sun's neighborhood; there if anywhere must circle the planets we seek! But Omega Centauri is twenty thousand light years away . . .

"Even so—by expending its remaining fuel freely, the *Quest III* could achieve a velocity that would take us there without dying of senility of aging too greatly. It would be a one-way journey—even if enough fuel remained, there would be little point in returning to Earth after more than forty thousand years. By then our civilization certainly, and perhaps the human race itself, would have perished from memory.

"That was why the planners limited our voyage, and those of the other *Quests*, to less than a thousand years Earth time. Even now, according to the sociodynamic predictions made then, our civilization—if the other expeditions failed also—will have reached a dangerously unstable phase, and before we can get back it may have collapsed completely from overpopulation.

"Why go back, then with the news of our failure? Why not forget about Earth and go on to Omega Centauri? What use is quixotic loyalty to a decree five thousand years old, whose makers are dead and which may be forgotten back there?

"Would the crew be willing? I don't know—some of them still show signs of homesickness, though they know with their minds that everything that was once 'home' has probably been swept away . . .

"It doesn't matter. Today I gave orders to swing the ship."

Savagely Knof Llud stabbed the button that shut off the speaker. Then he sat for a time with head resting in his hands, staring into nothing.

The memory of that fierce impulse to go on still had power to shake him. A couple of lines of poetry came into his head, as he read them once in translation from the ancient English . . .

*. . . for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.*

LLUD sighed. He still couldn't say just why he had given the order to turn back. The stars had claimed his heart—but he was still a part of Earth, and not even nine hundred years of space and time had been able to alter that.

He wondered if there would still be a quiet stream and a green shady place beside it where a death-weary man, relieved at last of responsibility, could rest and dream no more . . . Those things went on, if men didn't change them. And a pine forest where he and young Knof could go camping, and lie on their backs at night and gaze at the glittering constellations, far away, out of reach . . . He wasn't sure he would want to do that, though.

Suddenly a faint cushioned jar went through the great ship; it seemed to falter one moment in flight.

THE captain was on his feet instantly, but then his movements became unhurried. Whatever it had been was past, and he had a good idea what it had been—a meteoroid, nothing unusual in the vicinity of the Sun, though in interstellar space and around planetless stars such collisions were rare to the vanishing point. No harm could have been done. The *Quest III's* collision armor was nonmaterial and for practical purposes invulnerable.

Just as he took his finger off the button that opened the door, the intercommunication phone shrilled imperatively. Knof Llud wheeled, frowning—surely a meteoroid impact wasn't that serious. Coincidence, maybe—it might be Zost Relyul calling as instructed.

He reached the phone at the moment

when another, heavier jolt shook the vessel. Llud snatched up the receiver with the speed of a scalded cat.

"Captain?" It was Gwar Den's voice, stammering a little. "Captain, we're being attacked!"

"Sound the alarm. Emergency stations." He had said it automatically, then felt a curious detached relief at the knowledge that after all these years he could still respond quickly and smoothly to a crisis. There was a moment's silence, and he heard the alarm start—three short buzzes and repeat, ringing through all the great length of the interstellar ship. Knowing that Gwar Den was still there, he said, "Now—attacked by what?"

"Ships," said Gwar Den helplessly. "Five of them so far. No, there's a sixth now." Repeated blows quivered the *Quest III's* framework. The navigator said, obviously striving for calm, "They're light craft, not fifty feet long, but they move fast. The detectors hardly had time to show them before they opened up. Can't get a telescope beam on them long enough to tell much."

"If they're that small," said Knof Llud deliberately, "they can't carry anything heavy enough to hurt us. Hold to course. I'll be right up."

In the open doorway he almost fell over his son. Young Knof's eyes were big; he had heard his father's words.

"Something's happened," he judged with deadly twelve-year-old seriousness and, without wasting time on questions, "Can I go with you, huh, Dad?"

Llud hesitated, said, "All right. Come along and keep out of the way." He headed for the bridge with strides that the boy could not match.

There were people running in the corridors, heading for their posts. Their faces were set, scared, uncomprehending. The *Quest III* shuddered, again and again, under blows that must have had millions of horsepower behind them; but it plunged on toward Earth, its mighty engines still steadily braking its interstellar velocity.

To a man, the ship's responsible officers were already on the bridge, most of them breathless. To a man they looked appeal at Captain Knof Llud.

"Well?" he snapped. "What are they doing?"

Gwar Den spoke. "There are thirteen of them out there now, sir, and they're all hanging away at us."

The captain stared into the black star-strewn depths of a vision screen where occasional blue points of light winked ominously, never twice from the same position.

Knof Jr. flattened himself against the metal wall and watched silently. His young face was less anxious than his elders'; he had confidence in his father.

"If they had anything heavier," surmised the captain, "they'd have unlimbered it by now. They're out to get us. But at this rate, they can't touch us as long as our power lasts—or until they bring up some bigger stuff."

THE mild shocks went on—whether from projectiles or energy-charges, would be hard to find out and it didn't matter; whatever was hitting the *Quest III's* shell was doing it at velocities where the distinction between matter and radiation practically ceases to exist.

But that shell was tough. It was an extension of the gravitic drive field which transmitted the engines' power equally to every atom of the ship; forces impinging on the outside of the field were similarly transmitted and rendered harmless. The effect was as if the vessel and all space inside its field were a single perfectly elastic body. A meteoroid, for example, on striking it rebounded—usually vaporized by the impact—and the ship, in obedience to the law of equal and opposite forces, rebounded too, but since its mass was so much greater, its deflection was negligible.

The people in the *Quest III* would have felt nothing at all of the vicious onslaught being hurled against them, save that their inertialess drive, at its normal thrust of two hundred gravities, was intentionally operated at one half of one per cent efficiency to provide the illusion of Earthly gravitation.

One of the officers said shakily, "It's as if they've been lying in wait for us. But why on Earth—"

"That," said the captain grimly, "is what we have to find out. Why—on Earth. At least, I suspect the answer's there."

The *Quest III* bored steadily on through space, decelerating. Even if one were no fatalist, there seemed no reason to stop decelerating or change course. There was nowhere else to go and too little fuel left if there had been; come what might, this was journey's end—perhaps in a more violent and final way than had been anticipated. All around wheeled the pigmy enemies, circling, maneuvering, and attacking, always attacking, with the senseless fury of maddened hornets. The interstellar ship bore no offensive weapons—but suddenly on one of the vision screens a speck of light flared into nova-brilliance, dazzling the watchers for the brief moment in which its very atoms were torn apart.

Knof Jr. whooped ecstatically and then subsided warily, but no one was paying attention to him. The men on the *Quest III's* bridge looked questions at each other, as the thought of help from outside flashed into many minds at once. But Captain Llud said soberly, "It must have caught one of their own shots, reflected. Maybe its own, if it scored too direct a hit."

He studied the data so far gathered. A few blurred pictures had been got, which showed cylindrical space ships much like the *Quest III*, except that they were rocket-propelled and of far lesser size. Their size was hard to ascertain, because you needed to know their distance and speed—but detector-beam echoes gave the distance, and likewise, by the Doppler method, the velocity of directly receding or approaching ships. It was apparent that the enemy vessels were even smaller than Gwar Den had at first supposed—not large enough to hold even one man. Tiny, deadly hornets with a colossal sting.

"Robot craft, no doubt," said Knof Llud, but a chill ran down his spine as it occurred to him that perhaps the attackers weren't of human origin. They had seen no recognizable life in the part of the galaxy they had explored, but one of the other *Quests* might have encountered and been traced home by some unhuman race that was greedy and able to conquer.

IT BECAME evident, too, that the bombardment was being kept up by a constant arrival of fresh attackers, while others raced away into space, presumably returning to base to replenish their ammunition. That argued a planned and prepared interception with virulent hatred behind it.

Elsuz Llug, the gravitic engineer, calculated dismally "At the rate we're having to shed energy, the fuel will be gone in six or eight hours."

"We'll have reached Earth before then," Gwar Den said hopefully.

"If they don't bring out the heavy artillery first."

"We're under the psychological disadvantage," said the captain, "of not knowing why we're being attacked."

Knof Jr. burst out, spluttering slightly with the violence of a thought too important to suppress, "But we're under a psypsiological advantage, too!"

His father raised an eyebrow. "What's that? I don't seem to have noticed it."

"They're mad and we aren't, yet," said the boy. Then, seeing that he hadn't made himself clear, "In a fight, if a guy gets mad he starts swinging wild and then you nail him."

Smiles splintered the ice of tension. "Captain Llug said, 'Maybe you've got something there. They seem to be mad, all right. But we're not in a position to throw any punches.' He turned back to the others. 'As I was going to say—I think we'd better try to parley with the enemy. At least we may find out who he is and why he's determined to smash us.'"

And now instead of tight-beam detectors the ship was broadcasting on an audio carrier wave that shifted through a wide range of frequencies, repeating on each the same brief recorded message:

"Who are you?" What do you want? We are the interstellar expedition *Quest III* . . ." And so on, identifying themselves and protesting that they were unarmed and peaceful, that there must be some mistake, and querying again, "Who are you?"

There was no answer. The ship drove on, its fuel trickling away under multi-

←Planet—Fall

plied demands. Those outside were squandering vastly greater amounts of energy in the effort to batter down its defenses, but converting that energy into harmless gravitic impulses was costing the *Quest III* too. Once more Knof Llug had the insidious sense of his own nerves and muscles and will weakening along with the power-sinews of his ship.

Zost Relyul approached him apologetically. "If you have time, Captain—I've got some data on Earth now."

Eagerly Llug took the sheaf of photographs made with the telescope. But they told him nothing; only the continental outlines were clear, and those were as they had been nine hundred years ago . . . He looked up inquiringly at Zost Relyul.

"There are some strange features," said the astronomer carefully. "First of all—there are no lights on the night side. And on the daylight face, our highest magnification should already reveal traces of cities, canals, and the like—but it does not."

"The prevailing color of the land masses, you see, is the normal green vegetation. But the diffraction spectrum is queer. It indicates reflecting surfaces less than one-tenth millimeter wide—so the vegetation there can't be trees or grass, but must be more like a fine moss or even a coarse mold."

"Is that all?" demanded Llug.

"Isn't it enough?" said Zost Relyul blankly. "Well—we tried photography by invisible light, of course. The infra-red shows nothing and likewise the ultraviolet up to the point where the atmosphere is opaque to it."

The captain sighed wearily. "Good work," he said. "Keep it up; perhaps you can answer some of these riddles before—"

"We know who you are," interrupted a harshly crackling voice with a strange accent, "and pleading will do you no good."

KNOF LLUD whirled to the radio apparatus, his weariness dropping from him once more. He snapped, "But who are you?" and the words blended absurdly with the same words in his own voice on the still repeating tape.

He snapped off the record; as he did so

the speaker, still crackling with space static, said, "It may interest you to know that you are the last. The two other interstellar expeditions that went out have already returned and been destroyed, as you will soon be—the sooner, if you continue toward Earth."

Knof Llud's mind was clicking again. The voice—which must be coming from Earth, relayed by one of the midget ships—was not very smart; it had already involuntarily told him a couple of things—that it was not as sure of itself as it sounded he deduced from the fact it had deigned to speak at all, and from its last remark he gathered that the *Quest III's* ponderous and unswerving progress toward Earth had somehow frightened it. So it was trying to frighten them.

He shoved those facts back for future use. Just now he had to know something, so vitally that he asked it as a bald question, "Are you human?"

The voice chuckled sourly. "We are human," it answered, "but you are not."

The captain was momentarily silent, groping for an adequate reply. Behind him somebody made a choked noise, the only sound in the stunned hush, and the ship jarred slightly as a thunderbolt slammed vengefully into its field.

"Suppose we settle this argument about humanity," said Knof Llud woodenly. He named a vision frequency.

"Very well." The tone was like a shrug. The voice went on in its language that was quite intelligible, but alien-sounding with the changes that nine hundred years had wrought, "Perhaps, if you realize your position, you will follow the intelligent example of the *Quest I's* commander."

Knof Llud stiffened. The *Quest I*, launched toward Arcturus and the star cloud called Berenice's Hair, had been after the *Quest III* the most hopeful of the expeditions—and its captain had been a good friend of Llud's, nine hundred years ago . . . He growled, "What happened to him?"

"He fought off our interceptors, which are around you now, for some time," said the voice lightly. "When he saw that it was hopeless, he preferred suicide to defeat, and took his ship into the Sun." A

short pause. "The vision connection is ready."

Knof Llud switched on the screen at the named wavelength, and a picture formed there. The face and figure that appeared were ugly, but undeniably a man's. His features and his light-brown skin showed the same racial characteristics possessed by those aboard the *Quest III*, but he had an elusive look of deformity. Most obviously, his head seemed too big for his body, and his eyes in turn too big for his head.

He grinned nastily at Knof Llud. "Have you any other last wishes?"

"Yes," said Llud with icy control. "You haven't answered one question. Why do you want to kill us? You can see we're as human as you are."

The big-headed man eyed him with a speculative look in his great eyes, behind which the captain glimpsed the flickering raw fire of a poisonous hatred.

"It is enough for you to know that you must die."

L LUD frowned darkly—then an incredible light burst in his brain. He stared at the pictured figure with quite new and indescribable sensations. "You," he said slowly, "are not on Earth, as I was assuming; if you were, there'd be a time lag of quite a few minutes in this conversation. You must be on one of those miniature ships out there—which aren't big enough to hold a man!"

He saw the uncanny hate flare closer to the surface this time.

"You are clever," said the big-headed man spitefully. "Very well, then—in your screen you see some of the differences between me, who am human, and you, who are not any more. The main difference, which you do not see, is that I am three point sixty-two millimeters high, and you are more like two meters."

Knof Llud was speechless. The man who had just said he was an eighth of an inch tall grinned unpleasantly again at his amazement. "Yes," he said. "I am one of the New Humanity, which has replaced your kind on the Earth. You are the last of the old, subhuman race of giants, which will very shortly be extinct."

"It's impossible," whispered Llud. But he had to remember that he had been on the verge of deducing the thing himself.

The little man folded his arms and gazed at him with mocking superiority. "You have the mentality of nine hundred years ago. Your age would have called size reduction impossible, even though they already had most of the biophysical and genetic knowledge needed. They suffered from increasing overpopulation, but they were blind to the obvious answer—so Earth went through the wasteful folly of launching the interstellar ships. We are descended from dull-witted giants like you."

Cautiously, out of sight of the screen, Llud extended a hand and found a pad of memo blanks and a pencil. Without taking his eyes off the magnified, bragging image, he began to write. He thought he had the answer now to this murderous welcome.

"We have found the solution of the problem of growth," the image was saying. "For seven hundred years now, each generation has been smaller than the one before, so that there is constantly more room on the planet, relatively speaking; and the process still goes on. There are six hundred trillion of us on Earth now. In another two generations there will be a quadrillion human beings only two millimeters tall—and no overcrowding."

"But," the little man snarled venomously, "we have no room for you giants!"

Knof Llud sighed. The sagging lines of his face were calculated to reassure the other and his superiors on Earth, to whom the sight-sound conversation was undoubtedly being relayed. Llud said tiredly, "But you don't have any reason for destroying us. Why not let us land on one of the worthless outer planets, and make an attempt to live there? Or, if you will give us a little atomic fuel, we will leave the Solar System again and trouble you no more. In exchange we have a great deal of knowledge, data on the stars of the Taurus Cluster and beyond, to offer . . ."

As he spoke, he was beckoning Gwar Den to him, handing the navigator the brief order he had scrawled on the pad.

The little man laughed shortly. "As if

we could trust you—or wanted your worthless knowledge of stars! No, we will not bargain with giants."

The captain said slowly, for there was still time to be gained in order that the gamble he had decided on might have its chance, "You're very sure that you *can* smash us. Remember, we control gravitic forces, a science you have evidently lost."

He saw the look of sneering triumph waver a little; then the image snapped, "We destroyed the others. Your screen, whatever it is, is not impenetrable; we have power to break through it."

That was true, of course. The drive-field would collapse when the fuel ran out, desperately soon now.

Llud started to speak again; then he felt the nearly imperceptible lurch that meant the *Quest III* had applied a terrific acceleration at an angle to its line of flight. Gwar Den had done a quick job.

The impacts of enemy fire ceased; the ship's abrupt swerve had temporarily shaken off its rocket-driven tormentors.

Almost simultaneously the image on the screen looked startled. The man turned as if listening to some one else. "So you've begun a frantic attempt to dodge. It won't help you—" His jaw dropped and he listened again; this time he was a little longer overcoming his surprise. Knof Llud knew what the second message had been as surely as if he had been there—that the *Quest III*, far from doubling back, was still heading for Earth, from a slightly different angle, and was even accelerating. The side thrust had already ceased. That expenditure of fuel reduced the chances, but it had to be risked.

The little man faced Knof Llud again and smiled savagely. "Whatever you're trying, we're ready for you!"

"No doubt," thought the captain with some satisfaction. He sat up straighter and gazed at the little man. His discouraged air was gone and the look in his eyes was the distillate of cold, searing scorn. He said, biting off the words with deliberate emphasis, to that one and the others who would be listening, "You pitiful pigmies."

The face in the screen grew darker with rage; it opened its mouth and closed it with a snap.

"You pitiful pigmies," repeated Knof Llud. "You're pigmies not only in physical size, but in everything else. You've thrown away everything that made being human worthwhile, all for the sake of your one pigmy ambition—to multiply your crawling little lives and become more and more at the same time that you become less and less. You've shrunk into vermin. In the end you'll probably shrink away to nothing, and good riddance."

With sudden change of pace he shot out a question: "What's the longest wave length of visible light?"

"2100 angstroms," the answer was mechanical. Then, "You——"

The captain smiled a smile of weary disdain. "I thought so. Six hundred trillion of you, eh? Crawling around down there in the dark, because you see in the far ultraviolet—and the atmosphere stops those frequencies. You can't see the stars! For thousands of years men watched the stars and wanted them and were kept trying by sight of them—but you can't see the stars any more."

The face stared at him with great eyes full of unspeakable hate, and spat a word which had not been in the language when the *Quest III* was launched. The screen went suddenly blank.

KNOF LLUD turned away, and his eyes fell on another vision screen. Earth was clear in it, dead ahead, a disk so near that land and sea were distinguishable with the naked eye, and coming rapidly nearer. The sight cost him a moment's nostalgic pain; then he thought of the little men, swarming ant-like over every square foot of habitable land . . . Vermin he had called them; vermin they were.

He found himself, for no sensible reason, counting seconds. He had got to seventeen when the screen that showed Earth dissolved into a featureless and blinding glare.

At the same instant a force too tremendous for the senses to register smote the *Quest III*. The interior of the ship, everything and everyone in it seemed to stretch and distort like rubber as the gravitic field was strained beyond its elastic limit. The

lights went out as the drive units claimed the last erg of available energy and shrieked their overloaded protest through the crushing and twisted darkness.

But then the lights went on again and the ship was hurtling free in space. Its people picked themselves up dazedly and tried to understand why they were still alive.

"Gee, Dad," young Knof said admiringly as he dabbed at a blackening eye, "what did you do?"

"I didn't do much," said the captain. "The fireworks were from our little friends. I just took your advice about getting the other fellow mad, and it worked. They just shut their eyes and swung with everything they had."

The boy gazed at the vision screen where the Sun was already a star again. He whistled. "They had plenty."

"I thought the heavy artillery must be ready on Earth in case we kept going that way. It was—enough of it to knock us right out of the System at close to the speed of light. Just how close I don't know yet . . . ah." He took a couple of sheets of figures from the hands of Gwar Den, and devoured them rapidly. He nodded with satisfaction to the anxious faces around. "We must have been hit simultaneously by fire from all over one hemisphere—and the forces' resultant, which is now our course, came out as I had hoped . . . Our velocity is close enough; the journey will take about fourteen years, ship's time, but most of us can expect to live that long——"

"Where are we going?" demanded Knof Jr., unable to contain his curiosity.

Captain Knof Llud smiled down at his son with a touch of wistfulness. The memory of Earth, dwindling into infinite smallness behind, still hurt him; but young Knof would never know that hurt. And, after fourteen years, the captain would be about ready to leave his dream in younger hands . . . He laid an arm about the boy's shoulders and pointed silently to the forward vision screen, to a faint blurred light dead in its center.

"Omega Centauri," he said, and there was a new confidence in his voice.



He lashed out with his foot, somehow fought free.

ORDEAL IN SPACE

By RALPH SLOAN

This was Lieutenant Mike Logan's chance—alone in space with the man he ached to kill. A man, bound and helpless, who taunted him, dared him, goaded him—knowing Mike had to bring him in alive!

A NEEDLE GUN pointed through the cell bars at the hulking form of Edward Snyder, his blue-furred Moon mimic squirming on his lap. Behind it were the cold hands, cropped black hair, and bloodless face of Lt. Mike Logan. It had taken him three hours to slide past the guards of the transient prison. He would leave with the same efficient caution. *But first he had to kill!*

Snyder looked up and saw him. The flabby face twisted cynically. "Something personal, Lieutenant, or does the gun make it official?"

"Ask your questions in hell," Logan grated. His angular length was bent;

gray eyes bloodshot and he fought to keep them open. After two months of tramping over Pluto's ice cliffs, he had returned to Jupiter to find the odor of death and no rest.

A savage desire for revenge had driven him on until now he stood staring almost unseeing at the killer. The needle gun would be silent and untraceable. "You killed Johnny. This is for him."

Snyder shrugged beefy shoulders. "I've killed many and life is cheap. I can't remember them all."

"He was the last one," Logan choked. "He was my brother——" Something caught his arm in a vice from behind. A

stab of pain shot from his wrist to his neck.

"Sorry, Lieutenant, but I got to keep 'im alive," the voice of the prison guard broke in his ear. He felt the gun drop from his fingers and tried to break free. Through the bars he could dimly see Snyder's mocking smile. Then something struck him on the head and he slid a long ways down.

AN HOUR later he stood at attention before the command desk of the Patrol's Jupiter division. His knees were weak, chills of exhaustion tracing his back muscles. He was washed up and he knew it.

"I used to think I could count on you," Commander Bates stormed. "Well, I was wrong. You're nothing but a damned gutless jellyfish. If it weren't for your record I'd have you cashiered here and now."

Logan flinched and tightened his lips. "There's no room in the Patrol for a man who cracks," Bates raged on. "I'm sorry about Johnny. He had an easy way of getting under the skin and belonging to all of us. Even the natives liked him. You're different, Logan. You live for yourself."

Sand had crawled up under Logan's eyelids. He listened, too tired to be angered by the truth.

The Commander's eyes shifted to a sheaf of papers. "General Winkham sent me your requests for Transportation and Exploration licenses. I'm supposed to endorse them." He swept the papers away and glared. "Snyder dies on an Earth rope in three days and no self-appointed god has the right to make it a minute sooner."

"If you want my resignation—" Those papers had been his future. His and Johnny's . . . tattered remnants of a star dream.

"Damned your resignation," Bates roared. "Your going to be taught a lesson. You want Snyder—well, I'm giving him to you."

The room rocked. "You're *what*—?"

"You heard me." The older man snapped a piece of paper across his desk. "You're taking him to Earth for execution."

"I'll kill—" Mike Logan forgot about sleep.

"Go ahead," Bates challenged him. "He'll die anyway. If it happens while he's your charge, you'll be hanged in his place or psychoed out at the next exam. Johnny deserves a better tombstone. But maybe you haven't the decency to think of him."

Logan was trapped. His future lay on the desk, a crumpled mass of applications under the other's hairy fist. It took an A-1 discharge and a Patrol recommendation to get the needed licenses and he owed it to Johnny to keep trying.

"So this is a *last chance*," he breathed acidly. A believer in satanic justice, Bates always found a 'last chance' for the man who cracked. They were spawned in hell but never refused because there was no place in society for a Patrol 'wash out'.

The wisened superior looked strange. "It takes guts on the outer planets, Logan. I was born on Neptune. At ten I watched drunken natives work a Mhulo Taag sacrifice on my mother after killing my father and tying me up." He paled. "The priest used a sharp razor. I never forgot it or his face. Twelve years later I brought him in over six thousand miles of ice when I'd have given my soul to kill him."

IN the glare of the rocket field's giant arc lamps, Logan looked at his watch. In twenty minutes he was due to blast off. He watched the fueling of the small Patrol spacer and smoked a cigarette. His lips felt numb and the smoke drifted with a will of its own, sometimes drawn to the lungs with a breath, sometimes burning his nostrils. He wasn't aware.

Odd how he had pursued an even course for twenty-eight years, driving toward a goal he and his brother had planned since childhood, then suddenly losing his props. The Patrol had been a prerequisite of the government licenses they needed. For his part, Logan had been able to face hell, crawl through the stink and the mud and the cold of the outer planets. Yet the five years of service had been a task apart from him, a bridge to an end. Even his black Patrol uniform had seemed alien and temporary. But the blood on Johnny's

chest and the ugly dirk protruding from the flesh had struck home.

"Tell Mike to make it a good space line. I'll be around to see it," were Johnny's last words when they found him. Two days later the Patrol had smoked Snyder out of a cheap rooming house—trapped, still with the damned cynical smile.

There was movement at the field exit and four figures detached themselves from the darkness. Edward Snyder towered above the others, carrying his opal-eyed pet in his fettered hands; a sad-faced monkey-sized creature that imitated gestures and obeyed mental commands. Logan glanced swiftly at his watch—ten minutes! and moved to intercept the body.

"I'll take over," he said crisply.

Snyder's eyes widened, tiny chip blue flakes lost in flabby flesh. "Is this the pilot?" he demanded. "He'll kill me." But he kept his queer smile.

The guards were Jovians, local police, short, rotund, lobster faced individuals. One of them stepped forward. "Lieutenant Logan?"

Mike Logan nodded and showed his papers. The Jovian satisfied himself and returned them. His eyes waved on the end of stalks—supple, transparent muscles; never still.

"We are in charge until the moment of take-off, Lieutenant," he said stiffly. "If you will step aside we will chain the prisoner within the ship." He spoke with characteristic hollowness, a racial organic flaw.

"I think I can handle that," Mike said testily. Snyder laughed and he looked up a foot at the mocking face.

"They know you're going to kill me. You can wait till space, can't you, Logan?" He had found out his name.

Hate welled up in Logan's eyes and curdled his soul. But he had to stand with raw nerves and take it. The entourage, pushing past him, entered the Patrol ship. Blood ran down his fingers where the nails had bitten into the palms.

The Jovian guards chained Snyder to the bunk behind the control bucket. When they re-appeared their spokesman approached Logan.

"The prisoner is secure," he reported.

"Then your duty is done."

"Not until you leave," the guard corrected. He hesitated. "We have heard what occasioned at the prison. I knew your brother and mourn his passing. His killer has a strange mind, but he is to die—"

"He'll die," Logan promised dangerously.

"But you will cheat us. He has killed my people too. Have we no share in vengeance? Let him be hanged. Think—"

"Save it for your children," Logan broke in savagely. He turned angrily and climbed into the Patrol ship, his mind blazing with a dozen tangent thoughts. The port clapped shut like the jaws of death behind him. He sank into the control bucket, not looking at his prisoner, only the panel chronometer. The hands met straight up. He touched off the gravity-clearing charge and the breath was sucked from his lungs.

THE stars were pinpoints of light poking holes in the consciousness. He looked at them and wondered if Johnny were watching him. He didn't believe in ghosts, but—

It had been a great dream, he and the kid had had. There was little interplanetary transportation; none beyond Jupiter except by the Patrol. It had been the outer planets they had wanted to link. First the Patrol hitch to qualify, then the charting of bases and trajectories. With those they could have gone to the Earth government for financing. Mike wanted to say, "Don't worry, kid. I'll pick up the pieces." But he couldn't.

From behind him he heard the low squealing of the Moon mimic and Edward Snyder's laugh.

"Getting up the courage, Lieutenant?" he mocked. Logan could see him in the panel mirror, head cocked to one side, fat lips parted in an invitation to be smashed. "That gun," Snyder nodded to the holstered blaster. "It could do a neat job if you like intestines and blood."

The Patrolman's hand moved to the blaster's cold butt. His brain told him it could never be proved as murder. He could report an attempted escape and plant the evidence. He half withdrew the gun;

shivered and let it slide back. Sweat stood out on his face. There were things that wouldn't let him kill. The kid and his star dream and the unsigned license requests. The little Jovian with his idiotic sense of justice. And there was Bates and his native priest. He could see the picture, snow and glaciers—two men in a motor sled, as alone as a ship in space. *And here was Snyder and he couldn't kill him.* Maybe they would let him fit the noose about the killer's neck. Maybe he could beg them to let him spring the trap. He could be close then and watch the body dangle. But he would be cheated. It was second best so that Johnny and Bates, gray-haired satanic Bates, could be first. The decision left him weak.

Snyder watched the re-holstering of the gun and his eyes narrowed. "What's wrong? Haven't ya got the guts?"

"You'll get yours."

"I think you're yellow."

The tiredness dissolved as Logan whirled about and showed his teeth. "Don't push me, rat. There's a damn thin line between the worth of killing you myself and letting you hang."

THE fat man nodded and so did the mimic. They both seemed pleased. "I'm glad it's a thin line. Do you want to know why?"

"Not interested." Logan kept his eyes on the murderer while he fished Synthetic Sleep capsules from the panel locker. He needed something to dispel the sluggishness of his brain.

"You should be," Snyder taunted. "I love death. In life there's nothing, but there's glory in death." His tiny eyes blazed. "You're not free, Logan. No one is until they've balanced a knife over a being's heart and heard the breath rattle. You listen to the beat of the blood, knowing you can stop it in a second, or make it go slower and slower until it drains away."

Logan sat frozen; incredulous.

"You wonder why I say this," Snyder laughed. "It's because I'm going to choose my death." He looked strange. "I don't want to hang. If I can't escape and be free again, I'll *make you kill me.*" He stared for a minute, then threw back his

head and laughed. The mimic laughed, high loonish squeals.

"Hah, the blaster would be good. It has drama." Then the killer and his mimic curled up on the bunk in identical positions and went to sleep.

A feeling of nausea crept over Logan. The sound of the insane babbling struck a sickening note. Snyder was a maniac. No one had told him. At the height of the giant's bloody career he had been in the Plutonian hinterland. But Bates had known. He cursed the gray-haired brother of the devil.

The panel chronometer showed forty-six hours before he would reach Earth. Forty-six hours cooped up with a madman and a squealing mimic, his mind already foggy and with no prospect of rest. Since returning to Jupiter he had gone a long ways in the wrong direction. His logic was shaky and it was hard to tell what was right and wrong. A chill ran over him. Maybe he would be as mad as Snyder before he reached Earth.

Trouble first struck on the fourth hour sunward. Its nature was mechanical and deadly. The instrument panel belched smoke. The roar of the jet engines became erratic and jerky.

The patrolman's eyes swung from the mirror. His hands jumped, the left cutting the current with a blow to the ignition while the right unlocked and swung open the meter studded section. He heard Snyder stir behind him; the whimpering of the mimic. The confident drum of the engines died. Smoke poured upward and was sucked into the dying blades of the ventilator fans. Automatically activated, the blue emergency lights faded on.

The short was deep in the electrical maze. He knew the wiring by heart, could close his eyes and see pages of diagrams he had had to memorize in Patrol school. His fingers burned as he found the bare wire, flecks of molten insulation clinging to the tips. A long jumper-wire was dug from the panel locker.

"We're drifting," Snyder yelled. "Use the auxiliaries, fool."

"Shut up," Logan snapped. The ship pitched and swung end over end, caught in the ether-tides of the asteroid belt.

With the current cut they had no detectors, repulsers—even the air could not be replenished. Still he hesitated to expend the auxiliary jets. Their charge was limited. In space, auxiliaries weren't an answer to fate, only a brief postponement.

The defective wire ripped out, he cut his fingers fumbling with the connecting posts. The spacer leveled and flowed stern first. Something, probably a meteor the size of a thumbnail, struck the hull. It shivered and began revolving again.

"For God's sake, this is no way to die," Snyder screamed. The mimic screeched and leaped up and down.

Sweat ran into Mike Logan's eyes. One copper nipple slipped into its socket. Space develops a sixth sense and he felt the urgent nearness of the asteroid maze. One hand reached for the auxiliary switch as the other fought to mate nipple and post. Abruptly the nipple mated and his fist veered to strike the ignition button. An explosive stab of power drove them forward.

"You can stop crying, rat. We're safe." Logan looked in the mirror. His hands shook and he reached for a cigarette despite regulations. Snyder played with the bunk blankets; the mimic described little motions with its eight-fingered paws. He turned wearily back to the controls, resetting the course. The chronometer showed forty-three more hours.

Mental and physical endurance is limited and Logan's had been drained before returning to Jupiter. The sapping in the transient prison had found him in need of a bed, cool sheets, and a week of sleep. He hadn't completely cracked, only been sick with strain and shock. This *last chance* was too much. He had reached the emotional saturation point.

SOMETHING soft slid over his nose, caught and jerked him backward. The bucket's headrest hit his spine and he struck the deck rolling and cursing himself.

Snyder's laugh boomed as he dropped the improvised blanket-rope and caught Logan's throat in his huge hands. The Patrolman's eyes bulged as he was dragged to the edge of the bunk.

"I can feel the blood in your neck," Snyder gloated. "You're not clever, Logan. You're not strong. Your brother could fight."

The giant was master all the way. Mike could feel his face swell, lights dancing, as the sausage fingers tightened. Somewhere a foot found purchase. He lashed out with the other. The toe cut the edge of a small eye, momentarily relaxing the hold and he squirmed free. Chains crunched as Snyder lunged after him and was jerked back. He pulled himself to his feet, blaster in hand.

"Shoot," Snyder commanded him. "I tried to escape."

Instinct tightened Logan's finger on the trigger. Then he leaned against the hull and swore to the end of his strength while the giant laughed with crying eyes. The mimic imitated him with cracking little screeches.

At eighteen hours sunward he fed his prisoner. A stern locker opened into a compact kitchen and produced Earth meat and beans. He handed a plate and a dull spoon to Snyder, took one himself and sat on a stool. He wasn't hungry.

"You don't understand me, do you?" Snyder said wistfully.

"Shut up."

"Why don't you make me?" he demanded. "Why don't you kill me?" He brightened. "Do you know how I killed your brother?"

The blood drained from Lt. Logan's face.

"It was at the Jovian Feast of the Moons," Snyder related. "I had an argument with a Martian girl and he tried to interfere. I killed them both. She was a little cheat and he was a threat. I had to break both his arms before I could use the knife. He had a strong heart. He bled . . ."

Somehow the Patrol officer found the control bucket. He swallowed a full handful of Synthetic Sleep capsules. The mirror blurred and he tried to watch Snyder and think of Bates and the native and the motorsled in the snow. He told himself he had guts, but he was too tired and sick to hear his own thoughts. *He wanted to kill.*

Mars loomed up a swollen orange and swept astern. At thirty-six hours he attached a leash to the Moon mimic's fur hidden collar. It stopped the inane jumping.

The hands of the chronometer spun and there began a series of blank spaces which neither realization nor Synthetic Sleep could stop. He saw Johnny and the spaceline, Bates, the lobster-faced Jovians. The roaring jets became a lullaby.

At forty-one hours he pulled out the blaster and moved to confront Snyder. The fat man looked up with the same cynical smile.

"Give it to me," Logan ordered.

"What?"

"The file. I've been watching you."

The giant shrugged, brought the file in view and continued to saw at his chains. "This is Oscar's donation," he said. "I hid it in his collar. If you want it, take it with that." He nodded to the blaster.

Logan hesitated, licked his lips, then brought the gun down hard along a fleshy temple. The smile faded and the fat man folded. He took the file, searched the surroundings, the blankets in the corner, found nothing and returned to the controls. The odds were mounting against him. Maybe next time . . .

WHEN Edward Snyder regained consciousness an hour later, Logan's eyes hadn't left the mirror. The giant didn't smile anymore. Shortly he became occupied with his pet, making grabbing motions at the air.

The chronometer moved faster. There was Earth to look at—green, peaceful Earth. He had done it! A few more hours and the nightmare would be over! Lord, how he wanted sleep! He computed his primary orbit and tuned in the Lunar Patrol station.

"Logan calling . . ."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant." The cherub face of the Moon's radaronics operator appeared on the scanning screen.

"Requesting landing instructions from Earth via Moon." His set was too small to receive through Earth's atmosphere. The Moon acted as a relay station.

"Make ground contact at——"

"Do it—do it." The mental command aimed at the Moon mimic hit Logan's brain like a hot iron. It's hairy little arm shot past him, grabbed the ignition jumper wire as it had watched Snyder grab air, and jerked it loose. As the engines died and the blue emergency lights faded on, Snyder laughed and the mimic screeched, jumping about, waving its prize and dragging the frayed leash the killer had broken.

Logan hit the auxiliary switch. They were within the Moon's gravitational pull and he had no choice. He was exhausted and felt like crying. Lord, was there no end to it? Would the lunatic never stop? Hadn't he paid enough for his own relapse?

The startled face of the radaronics operator flashed on the screen again. "Prepare for crash," Logan shouted at him, then cut the power to conserve fuel.

Through the steering port he could see the soiled craters of the Moon leaping up at him and the Patrol spacer began to whine and vibrate as it hit the three pound air pressure. He sweat over the auxiliary controls, nursing the fuel in short bursts, breaking the rate of fall, juggling the angle. They were west of the Mountains of Caucasus and directly above a narrow strip of plains. Within a thousand feet he hit the jet activator and held it. A single explosive roar sounded; died. There was nothing more he could do. He closed his eyes and began to pray.

The Patrol spacer hit and dug a furrow across the plain for three miles, eight inches of the finest steel fighting lava rock and meteor metal. The base of the Alps range was within leaping distance when the battered hull shivered to a halt. The deck was twisted and friction smoke filled the air.

Logan got up. His legs didn't want to hold him, but he got up anyhow. There was blood on his face and more oozing from his thigh. He heard the high whine of escaping air, moved to a stern locker and pulled out two pressure suits. His arms and legs were like lead. He wanted to lie down on the floor, say to-hell-with-everything—maybe die.

Edward Snyder was quiet but alive and

conscious. A trickle of blood ran from his nose and dripped from the second chin. The monkey-like mimic moaned up and down the scale.

"Put this on," Logan whispered. He tossed one of the suits on the bunk. Enough air had escaped to hamper breathing and effect his voice.

"I'm chained," Snyder snarled. "For God's sake, why don't you kill me?"

For a moment Logan stared at him, then swayed and caught himself on the bulkhead. He had reached the end and he knew it. He lifted the blaster toward his captive.

Snyder's expression was ethereal. He threw back his shoulders and braced himself. Then the massive face turned blank as the leg chains were carried away. The second blast freed one arm. Logan dropped the piece of file on the bunk. The fat man stared dumbly, then snatched it up and sawed at the remaining chain with savage joy.

Lt. Mike Logan crawled numbly into his pressure suit, slipped out an escape hatch and dropped to the Moon's cold crust. He couldn't let Snyder die; he couldn't stay with the insane killer free. There was no end to it.

He struck off toward the towering crags of the Alps. His lead wouldn't be much. Snyder with his twisted brain would be after him in a few minutes, but he didn't care how it ended anymore. The giant couldn't escape from the Moon. They'd get him again. But he, Logan, wasn't going to kill.

The horizon was foggy. He could see Bates and the motorsled.

They'd know he'd had the guts . . .

IT WAS a nightmare, falling, getting up, falling again. He had made it to the first row of foothills when Edward Snyder caught him. The giant had found a knife in the galley and he brandished it over his head, narrowing the distance between them with long leaps. Logan's normal thirty foot Moon strides had fallen to ten. There was nothing left in him. He felt the impact of weight against his back, an arm tighten about his neck and they fell to the rocks. Only a trick of the gravity

saved him from the first dipping of the knife.

How long they fought there was no reckoning. Logan could see the giant laughing within his plastic helmet and he thought of Johnny and found the strength to fight. He held his blaster club fashion and struck feebly. He knew it couldn't last long. Nothing as uneven, as unfair as this ever did.

The two pressure-suited bodies bounced over the rocky surface, Snyder's mad threshing tossing them yards into the air. When they lit the last time something snapped and Logan's arm twisted queerly.

Above them, on a projection of rock, he saw the mimic waving. the knife it had acquired to imitate its insane master. Logan summoned all his strength in a desperate gamble on the creature's one virtue. "Do it! Do it! Damn it, do it!"

Snyder grinned and raised his knife for aim.

The blue-furred Moon native hesitated, uncertain, then teetered and dropped downward. It landed on Snyder's shoulder, the knife describing an awkward arc. The giant's pressure suit exploded as a six inch gash, was opened behind the neck. The mad leer disappeared and the fat man gasped at the scant air. He flailed about, rolling over and over, pulling Logan with him, then lay still; his eyes pushed upward, fighting to breathe.

A shower of lights hit Logan's brain. A chant pounded accompaniment. "Can't kill 'im. Can't kill 'im. Can't—" The plastic helmet of the mad Cyclops had shattered on the rocks and he found himself hammering feebly at the loose features, tears of exhaustion streaming down his face. The mimic continued to slash with the knife and the Patrolman's suit dissolved, the left shoulder laid open. It grew very dark . . .

THERE was a bed and sheets and the smell of tobacco smoke when he came to. The room was in semi-darkness, but he could make out two figures.

"Cigarette?" one of them asked and held a match. The other occupant opened the shades and light filtered in. Immediately he recognized the first. The long thin face

and the bright eyes belonged to General Winkham, commanding general of the Patrol.

"Sir—" He tried to sit up, but the arm cast held him.

"No need for formality, Logan." The general smiled. "The radaronics operator tracked your ship down. You were near dead when the searching party spotted that mimic." He chuckled. "They had the devil's own time disarming the little beast."

"What—what about Snyder?"

The general sobered. "You've been asleep for two days. Snyder was hanged yesterday."

The other officer drew himself up stiffly. He wore a captain's bars and was obviously the post commandant. "I think I should point out that the prisoner was assaulted, General. Charges will have to be made."

Winkham frowned. "Is that right, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know." He swallowed hard and then told it from the beginning—Johnny, Bates—everything. "I remember thinking at the last that I couldn't kill him. Maybe I hit him; I don't know."

"The situation is obvious," the captain summarized coldly. "The prisoner was already subdued and therefore the beating was unnecessary and in violation of the Conduct Code. You'll sit on the court marshal, of course, General?" The inner planets were hurtfully strict on regulations.

"Get out of here," Winkham snapped. When the other had fled he turned to Logan. "I'm sorry about this, Lieutenant,

but the captain is within his rights. I don't hold with these teaparty technicalities, but you can see my position. Why didn't you kill the blasted maniac? It would have been self-defense."

Logan experienced a wave of bitterness. The hell had been for nothing. Something he didn't even remember clearly had caused him to fail Bates, fail Johnny. "Bates told me he had brought in the native that tortured his mother to death," he said weakly. "I tried to show as much guts. I guess I haven't got it."

"Bates, eh?" Winkham mused and looked out the window. "I was his commanding officer then. The native was alive all right, but we always wondered how his ears got sliced off and stuffed in his mouth. We questioned him but couldn't make out his language."

"Neptunian priests all speak English," Logan contradicted.

"I know, but none of us did," the General returned with a wry grin. "And I don't think anyone on this post will either. Even if I have to break a captain to a hangar-monkey." He got up and paced the room. "Bates says you want to start a space line. Says you're a good man with ideas—"

There was a growing spot of warmth in Logan's abdomen as he smoked and listened to the famous "Winks". It was pride at belonging with men as great as Bates and Johnny and Winkham. He could say it to Johnny, now, softly. "Don't worry, kid. I'll pick up the pieces . . ."

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CAPTAIN MIDAS

By **ALFRED COPPEL, JR.**

The captain of the Martian Maid stared avidly at the torn derelict floating against the velvet void. Here was treasure beyond his wildest dreams! How could he know his dreams should have been nightmares?

GOLD! A MAGIC WORD, EVEN today, isn't it? Lust and gold . . . they go hand in hand. Like the horsemen of the Apocalypse. And, of course, there's another word needed to make up the trilogy. You don't get any thing for nothing. So add this: Cost. Or you might call it pain, sorrow, agony. Call

it what you like. It's what you pay for great treasure . . .

These things were true when fabled Jason sailed the Argo beyond Colchis seeking the Fleece. They were true when men sailed the southern oceans in wooden ships. And the conquest of space hasn't changed us a bit. We're still a greedy lot . . .

"I'm a queer one to be saying these things, but then, who has more right? Look at me. My hair is gray and my face . . . my face is a mask. The flesh hangs on my bones like a yellow cloth on a rickety frame. I am old, old. And I wait here on my hospital cot—wait for the weight of years I never lived to drag me under and let me forget the awful things my eyes have seen.

I'm poor, too, or else I wouldn't be here in this place of dying for old spacemen. I haven't a dime except for the pittance the Holcomb Foundation calls a spaceman's pension. Yet I had millions in my hands. Treasure beyond your wildest dreams! Cursed treasure . . .

You smile. You are thinking that I'm just an old man, beached earthside, spinning tall tales to impress the youngsters. Maybe, thinking about the kind of spacemen my generation produced, you have the idea that if ever we'd so much as laid a hand on anything of value out in space we'd not let go until Hell froze over! Well, you're right about that. We didn't seek the spaceways for the advancement of civilization or any of that Foundation bushwah, you can be certain of that. We did it for us . . . for Number One. That's the kind of men we were, and we were proud of it. We hung onto what we found because the risks were high and we were entitled to keep what we could out there. But there are strange things in the sky. Things that don't respond to all of our neat little Laws and Theories. There are things that are no part of the world of men, thick with danger—and horror.

IF YOU doubt that—and I can see you do—just look at me. I suppose you've never heard of the Martian Maid, and so you don't know the story of what happened to her crew or her skipper. I can give you this much of an answer. I was her skipper. And her crew? They ride high in the sky . . . dust by this time. And all because they were men, and men are greedy and hasty and full of an unreasoning, unthinking love for gold. They ride a golden ship that they paid for with all the years of their lives. It's all theirs now. Bought and paid for.

It wasn't too long ago that I lifted the Maid off Solis Lacus on that last flight. Not many of you will remember her class of ship, so many advances have been made in the last few years. The Maid was two hundred feet from tip to tail, and as sleek a spacer as ever came out of the Foundation Yards. Chemical fuelled, she was, nothing at all like the spherical hyperdrives we see today. She was armed, too. The Foundation still thought of space as a possible stamping ground for alien creatures though no evidence of any extra-terrestrial life had ever been found . . . then.

My crew was a rough bunch, like all those early crews. I remember them so well. Lean, hungry men with hell in their eyes and a great lust for high pay and hard living. Spinelli, Shelley, Cohn, Marvin, Zaleski. There wasn't a man on board who wouldn't have traded his immortal soul for a few solar dollars, and I don't claim that I was any different. That's the kind of men that opened up the spaceways, too. Don't believe all this talk about the noble pioneering spirit of man. That's tripe. There never has been such a thing as a noble pioneer. Not in space or anywhere else. It is the malcontent and the adventuring mercenary that pushes the frontier outward.

I didn't know, that night as I stood in the valve of the Maid, watching the loading cranes pull away, that I was starting out on my last flight. I don't think any of the others could have guessed, either. It was the sort of night that you only see on Mars. The sort of night that makes a spaceman wonder why in hell he wants to leave the relative security of the Earth-Mars-Venus Triangle to go jetting across the belt into deep space and the drab desolation of the outer System.

I stood there, watching the lights of Canaopolis in the distance. For just a moment I was . . . well, touched. It looked beautiful and unreal under the racing moons. The lights of the gin mills and houses made a sparkling filligree pattern on the dark waters of the ancient canal, and the moons cast their shifting shadows across the silted banks. I was too far away to see the space-fevered bums and smell

the shanties, and for a little while I felt the wonder of standing on the soil of a world that man had made his own with his rapacity and his sheer guts and gimme.

I thought of our half empty cargo hold and the sweet payload we would pick up on Callisto. And I counted the extra cash my packets of snow would bring from those lonely men up there on the barren moonlets of the outer Systems. There were plenty of cargos carried on the Maid that the Holcomb Foundation snoopers never heard about, you can be sure of that.

In those days the asteroid belt was *the* primary danger and menace to astrogation. For a long while it held men back from deep space, but as fuels improved a few ships were sent out over the top. A few million miles up out of the ecliptic plane brings you to a region of space that's pretty thinly strewn with asteroids, and that's the way we used to make the flight between the outer systems and the EMV Triangle. It took a long while for hyperdrives to be developed and of course atomics never panned out because of the weight problem.

So that's the orbit the Maid took on that last trip of mine. High and clear into the supra-solar void. And out there in that primeval blackness is where we found the derelict.

I DIDN'T realize it was a derelict when Spinelli first reported it from the forward scope position. I assumed it was a Foundation ship. The Holcomb Foundation was founded for the purpose of developing spaceflight, and as the years went by it took on the whole responsibility for the building and dispatching of space ships. Never in history had there been any real evidence of extra-terrestrial intelligent life, and when the EMV Triangle prove barren, we all just assumed that the Universe was man's own particular oyster. That kind of unreasoning arrogance is as hard to explain as it is to correct.

There were plenty of ships being lost in space, and immediately that Spinelli's report from up forward got noised about the Maid every one of us started mentally counting up his share of the salvage money. All this before we were within ten thousand miles of the hulk!

All spaceships look pretty much alike, but as I sat at the telescope I saw that there was something different about this one. At such a distance I couldn't get too much detail in our small three inch glass, but I could see that the hulk was big—bigger than any ship I'd ever seen before. I had the radar fixed on her and then I retired with my slide rule to Control. It wasn't long before I discovered that the derelict ship was on a near collision course, but there was something about its orbit that was strange. I called Cohn, the Metering Officer, and showed him my figures.

"Mister Cohn," I said, chart in hand, "do these figures look right to you?"

Cohn's dark eyes lit up as they always did when he worked with figures. It didn't take him long to check me. "The math is quite correct, Captain," he said. I could see that he hadn't missed the inference of those figures on the chart.

"Assemble the ship's company, Mister Cohn," I ordered.

The assembly horn sounded throughout the Maid and I could feel the tug of the automatics taking over as the crew left their stations. Soon they were assembled in Control.

"You have all heard about Mister Spinelli's find," I said, "I have computed the orbit and inspected the object through the glass. It seems to be a spacer . . . either abandoned or in distress . . ." Reaching into the book rack above my desk I took down a copy of the Foundation's *Space Regulations* and opened it to the section concerning salvage.

"Sections XVIII, Paragraph 8 of the Code Regulating Interplanetary Astrogation and Commerce," I read, "Any vessel or part of vessel found in an abandoned or totally disabled condition in any region of space not subject to the sovereignty of any planet of the Earth-Venus-Mars Triangle shall be considered to be the property of the crew of the vessel locating said abandoned or disabled vessel except in such cases as the ownership of said abandoned or disabled vessel may be readily ascertained . . ." I looked up and closed the book. "Simply stated, that means that if that thing ahead of us is a derelict we are entitled to claim it as salvage."

"Unless it already belongs to someone?" asked Spinelli.

"That's correct Mister Spinelli, but I don't think there is much danger of that," I replied quietly. "My figures show that hulk out there came in from the direction of Coma Berenices . . ."

There was a long silence before Zaleski shifted his two hundred pounds uneasily and gave a form to the muted fear inside me. "You think . . . you think it came from the *stars*, Captain?"

"Maybe even from beyond the stars," Cohn said in a low voice.

Looking at that circle of faces I saw the beginnings of greed. The first impact of the Metering Officer's words wore off quickly and soon every man of my crew was thinking that anything from the stars would be worth money . . . lots of money.

Spinelli said, "Do we look her over, Captain?"

They all looked at me, waiting for my answer. I knew it would be worth plenty, and money hunger was like a fever inside me.

"Certainly we look it over, Mister Spinelli," I said sharply, "Certainly!"

THE first thing about the derelict that struck us as we drew near was her size. No ship ever built in the Foundation Yards had ever attained such gargantuan proportions. She must have stretched a full thousand feet from bow to stern, a sleek torpedo shape of somehow unspeakable alienness. Against the backdrop of the Milky Way, she gleamed fitfully in the light of the faraway sun, the metal of her flanks grained with something like tiny, glittering whorls. It was as though the stuff were somehow unstable . . . seeking balance . . . maybe even alive in some strange and alien way.

It was readily apparent to all of us that she had never been built for interplanetary flight. She was a starship. Origin unknown. An aura of mystery surrounded her like a shroud, protecting the world that gave her birth mutely but effectively. The distance she must have come was unthinkable. And the time it had taken . . .? Aeons. Millenia. For she was drifting, dead in space, slowly

spinning end over end as she swung about Sol in a hyperbolic orbit that would soon take her out and away again into the interstellar deeps.

Something had wounded her . . . perhaps ten million years ago . . . perhaps yesterday. She was gashed deeply from stem to stern with a jagged rip that bared her mangled innards. A wandering asteroid? A meteor? We would never know. It gave me an uncomfortable feeling of things beyond the ken of men as I looked at her through the port. I would never know what killed her, or where she was going, or whence she came. Yet she was mine. It made me feel like an upstart. And it made me afraid . . . but of what?

We should have reported her to the nearest EMV base, but that would have meant that we'd lose her. Scientists would be sent out. Men better equipped than we to investigate the first extrasolar artifact found by men. But I didn't report her. She was ours. She was money in the bank. Let the scientists take over after we'd put a prize crew aboard and brought her into Callisto for salvage . . . That's the way I had things figured.

The Maid hove to about a hundred yards from her and hung there, dwarfed by the mighty glistening ship. I called for volunteers and we prepared a boarding party. I was thinking that her drives alone would be worth millions. Cohn took charge and he and three of the men suited up and crossed to her.

In an hour they were back, disappointment largely written on their faces.

"There's nothing left of her, Captain," Cohn reported, "Whatever hit her tore up the innards so badly we couldn't even find the drives. She's a mess inside. Nothing left but the hull and a few storage compartments that are still unbroken."

She was never built to carry humanoids he told us, and there was nothing that could give us a hint of where she had come from. The hull alone was left.

He dropped two chunks of metal on my desk. "I brought back some samples of her pressure hull," he said, "The whole thing is made of this stuff . . ."

"We'll still take her in," I said, hiding my disappointment. "The carcass will be

worth money in Callisto. Have Mister Marvin and Zaleski assemble a spare pulse-jet. We'll jury-rig her and bring her down under her own power. You take charge of provisioning her. Check those compartments you found and install oxy-generators aboard. When it's done report to me in my quarters."

I picked up the two samples of gleaming metal and called for a metallurgical testing kit. "I'm going to try and find out if this stuff is worth anything . . ."

The metal was heavy—too heavy, it seemed to me, for spaceship construction. But then, who was to say what conditions existed on that distant world where this metal was made?

Under the bright fluorescent over my work-table, the chunks of metal torn from a random bulkhead of the starship gleamed like pale silver; those strange little whorls that I had noticed on the outer hull were there too, like tiny magnetic lines of force, making the surface of the metal seem to dance. I held the stuff in my bare hand. *It had a yellowish tinge, and it was heavy . . .*

Even as I watched, the metal grew yellow, and the hand that held it grew bone weary, little tongues of fatigue licking up my forearm. Suddenly terrified, I dropped the chunk as though it were white hot. It struck the table with a dull thud and lay there, a rich yellow lump of metallic lustre.

For a long while I just sat and stared. Then I began testing, trying all the while to quiet the trembling of my hands. I weighed it on a balance. I tested it with acids. It had changed unquestionably. It was no longer the same as when I had carried it into my quarters. The whorls of force were gone. It was no longer alive with a quivering vibrancy . . . it was inert, stable. From somewhere, somehow, it had drawn the energy necessary for transmutation. The unknown metal—the stuff of which that whole mammoth spaceship from the stars was built—was now . . .

Gold!

I scarcely dared believe it, but there it was staring at me from my table-top. *Gold!*

5—Planet—Fall

I searched my mind for an explanation. Contra-terrene matter, perhaps, from some distant island universe where matter reacted differently . . . drawing energy from somewhere, the energy it needed to find stability in its new environment. Stability as a terrene element—wonderfully, miraculously gold!

And outside, in the void beyond the Maid's ports there were tons of this metal that could be turned into treasure. My laughter must have been a wild sound in those moments of discovery . . .

A SLIGHT sound behind me made me spin around in my chair. Framed in the doorway was the heavy figure of my Third Officer, Spinelli. His black eyes were fastened hungrily on the lump of yellow metal on the table. He needed no explanation to tell him what it was, and it seemed to me that his very soul reached out for the stuff, so sharp and clear was the meaning of the expression on his heavy face.

"Mister Spinelli!" I snapped, "In the future knock before entering my quarters!"

Reluctantly his eyes left the lump of gold and met mine. "From the derelict, Captain?" There was an imperceptible pause between the last two words.

I ignored his question and made a mental note to keep a close hand on the rein with him. Spinelli was big and dangerous.

"Speak your piece, Mister," I ordered sharply.

"Mister Cohn reports the derelict ready to take aboard the prize crew . . . sir," he said slowly. "I'd like to volunteer for that detail."

I might have let him go under ordinary circumstances, for he was a first class spaceman and the handling of a jury-rigged hulk would need good men. But the gold-hunger I had seen in his eyes warned me to beware. I shook my head. "You will stay on board the Maid with me, Spinelli. Cohn and Zaleski will handle the starship."

Stark suspicion leaped into his eyes. I could see the wheels turning slowly in his mind. Somehow, he was thinking, I was planning to cheat him of his right-

ful share of the derelict treasure ship.

"We will say nothing to the rest of the crew about the gold, Mister Spinelli," I said deliberately, "Or you'll go to Callisto in irons. Is that clear?"

"Aye, sir," murmured Spinelli. The black expression had left his face and there was a faintly scornful smile playing about his mouth as he turned away. I began wondering then what he had in mind. It wasn't like him to let it go at that.

Suddenly I became conscious of being very tired. My mind wasn't functioning quite clearly. And my arm and hand ached painfully. I rubbed the fingers to get some life back into them, still wondering about Spinelli.

Spinelli talked. I saw him murmuring something to big Zaleski, and after that there was tension in the air. Distrust.

For a few moments I pondered the advisability of making good my threat to clap Spinelli into irons, but I decided against it. In the first place I couldn't prove he had told Zaleski about the gold and in the second place I needed Spinelli to help run the Maid.

I felt that the Third Officer and Zaleski were planning something, and I was just as sure that Spinelli was watching Zaleski to see to it that there was no double-cross.

I figured that I could handle the Third Officer alone so I assigned the rest, Marvin and Chelly, to accompany Cohn and Zaleski onto the hulk. That way Zaleski would be outnumbered if he tried to skip with the treasure ship. But, of course, I couldn't risk telling them that they were to be handling a vessel practically made of gold.

I was in agony. I didn't want to let anyone get out of my sight with that starship, and at the same time I couldn't leave the Maid. Finally I had to let Cohn take command of the prize crew, but not before I had set the radar finder on the Maid's prow squarely on the derelict.

TOGETHER, Spinelli and I watched the Maid's crew vanish into the maw of the alien ship and get her under way. There was a flicker of bluish fire from her jury-rigged tubes astern, and then she was vanishing in a great arc toward the

bright gleam of Jupiter, far below us. The Maid followed under a steady one G of acceleration with most of her controls on automatic.

Boats of the Martian Maid's class, you may remember, carried a six inch supersonic projector abaft the astrogation turret. These were nasty weapons for use against organic life only. They would reduce a man to jelly at fifty thousand yards. Let it be said to my credit that it wasn't I who thought of hooking the gun into the radar finder and keeping it aimed dead at the derelict. That was Spinelli's insurance against Zaleski.

When I discovered it I felt the rage mount in me. He was willing to blast every one of his shipmates into pulp should the hulk vary from the orbit we'd laid out for her. He wasn't letting anything come between him and that mountain of gold.

Then I began thinking about it. Suppose now, just suppose, that Zaleski told the rest of the crew about the gold. It wouldn't be too hard for the derelict to break away from the Maid, and there were plenty of places in the EMV Triangle where a renegade crew with a thousand tons of gold would be welcomed with open arms and no questions asked. Suspicion began to eat at me. Could Zaleski and Cohn have dreamed up a little switch to keep the treasure ship for themselves? It hadn't seemed likely before, but now—

The gun-pointer remained as it was.

As the days passed and we reached turn-over with the hulk still well within visual range, I noticed a definite decrease in the number of messages from Cohn. The Aldis Lamps no longer blinked back at the Maid eight or ten times a day, and I began to really regret not having taken the time to equip the starship with UHF radio communicators.

Each night I slept with a hunk of yellow gold under my bunk, and ridiculously I fondled the stuff and dreamed of all the things I would have when the starship was cut up and sold.

My weariness grew. It became almost chronic, and I soon wondered if I hadn't picked up a touch of space-radiation fever. The flesh of my hands seemed paler than it had been. My arms felt heavy. I de-

terminated to report myself to the Foundation medics on Callisto. There's no telling what can happen to a man in space . . .

Two days past turn-over the messages from the derelict came through garbled. Spinelli cursed and said that he couldn't read their signal. Taking the Aldis from him I tried to raise them and failed. Two hours later I was still failing and Spinelli's black eyes glittered with an animal suspicion.

"They're faking!"

"Like hell they are!" I snapped irritably, "Something's gone wrong . . ."

"Zaleski's gone wrong, that's what!"

I turned to face him, fury snapping inside of me. "Then you did disobey my orders. You told him about the gold!"

"Sure I did," he sneered. "Did you expect me to shut up and let you land the ship yourself and claim Captain's share? I found her, and she's mine!"

I fought to control my temper and said: "Let's see what's going on in her before deciding who gets what, Mister Spinelli."

Spinelli bit his thick lips and did not reply. His eyes were fixed on the image of the starship on the viewplate.

A light blinked erratically within the dark cut of its wounded side.

"Get this down, Spinelli!"

The habit of taking orders was still in him, and he muttered: "Aye . . . sir."

The light was winking out a message, but feebly, as though the hand that held the lamp were shaking and the mind conceiving the words were failing.

"CONTROL . . . LOST . . . CAN'T . . . NO . . . STRENGTH . . . LEFT . . . SHIP . . . WALLS . . . ALL . . . ALL GOLD . . . GOLD . . . SOMETHING . . . HAPPENING . . . CAN'T . . . UNDERSTAND . . . WHA . . ." The light stopped flashing, abruptly, in mid-word

"What the hell?" demanded Spinelli thickly.

"Order then to heave to, Mister," I ordered.

He clicked the Aldis at them. The only response was a wild swerve in the starship's course. She left the orbit we had set for her as though the hands that guided her had fallen away from the control.

Spinelli dropped the Aldis and rushed to the control panel to make the corrections in the Maid's course that were needed to keep the hulk in sight.

"Those skunks! Double crossing rats!" he breathed furiously. "They won't shake loose that easy!" His hands started down for the firing console of the supersonic rifle.

I caught the movement from the corner of my eye.

"Spinelli!"

My shout hung in the still air of the control room as I knocked him away from the panel.

"Get to your quarters!" I cracked.

He didn't say a thing, but his big shoulders hunched angrily and he moved across the deck toward me, his hands opening and closing spasmodically. His eyes were wild with rage and avarice.

"You'll hang for mutiny, Spinelli!" I said.

HE spat out a foul name and leaped for me. I side-stepped his charge and brought my joined fists down hard on the back of his neck. He stumbled against the bulkhead and his eyes were glazed. He charged again, roaring. I stepped aside and smashed him in the mouth with my right fist, then crossing with an open-handed left to the throat. He staggered, spun and came for me again. I sank a hard left into his stomach and nailed him on the point of the jaw with a right from my shoe-tops. He straightened up and sprawled heavily to the deck, still trying to get at me. I aimed a hard kick at his temple and let it go. My metal shod boot caught him squarely and he rolled over on his face and lay still.

Breathing heavily, I rolled him back face up. His eyes were open, glassy with an implacable hate. I knelt at his side and listened for his breathing. There was none. I knew then that I had killed him. I felt sick inside, and dizzy.

I wasn't myself as I turned away from Spinelli's body there on the steel deck. Some of the greed died out of me, and my exertions had increased my sense of fatigue to an almost numbing weariness. My arms ached terribly and my hands

felt as though they had been sucked dry of their substance. Like a man in a nightmare, I held them up before my face and looked at them. They were wrinkled and grey, with the veins standing out a sickly purple. And I could see that my arms were taking on that same aged look.

I was suddenly fully aware of my fear. Nothing fought against the flood of terror that welled through me. I was terrified of that yellow gold in my cabin, and of that ship of devil's metal out there in space that held my shipmates. There was something unnatural about that contra-terrene thing . . . something obscene.

I located the hulk in the radar finder and swung the Maid after it, piling on acceleration until my vision flickered. We caught her, the Maid and I. But we couldn't stop her short of using the rifle on her, and I couldn't bring myself to add to my depravity by killing the rest of my men. It would have been better if I had!

I laid the Maid alongside the thousand foot hull of the derelict and set the controls on automatic. It was dangerous, but I was beyond caring. Then I was struggling to get myself into a pressure suit with my wrinkled, failing hands . . . Then I was outside, headed for that dark hole.

I sank down into the stillness of her interior, my helmet light casting long, fey shadows across the littered decks. Decks that had a yellowish cast . . . decks that no longer danced with tiny questing force-whorls . . .

As I approached the airlock of the compartment set aside as living quarters for the prize crew, the saffron of the walls deepened. Crazy little thoughts began spinning around in my brain. Words out of the distant past loomed up with a new and suddenly terrifying perspective . . . alchemy . . . transmutation . . . energy. I'm a spaceman, not a scientist. But in those moments I think I was discovering what had happened to my crew and why the walls were turning into yellow metal.

The lock was closed, but I swung it open and let the pressure in the chamber rise. I couldn't wait for it to reach four-

teen pounds . . . at eleven, I swung the inner door and stumbled eagerly through. The brilliant light, reflected from gleaming walls blinded me for a moment.

And then I saw them! They huddled, almost naked in a corner, skeletal things with skull-like faces that leered at me with the vacuous obscenity of old age. Even their voices were raw and cracked with the rusty decay of years. They babbled stupidly, carressing the walls with claw-like hands. They were old, old!

I understand then. I knew what my wrinkled aged hands meant. That devil-metal from beyond the stars had drawn the energy it needed from . . . us!

My laughter was a crazy shriek inside my helmet. I looked wildly at the gleaming walls that had sucked the youth and strength from these men. The walls were stable, at rest. They were purest gold . . . gold . . . gold!

I ran from that place still screaming with the horror of it. My hands burned like fire! Age was in them, creeping like molten lead through my veins, ghastly and sure . . .

I reached the Maid and threw every scrap of that alien metal into space as I streaked madly away from that golden terror in the sky and its load of ancient evil . . .

ON Callisto I was relieved of my command. The Admiralty Court acquitted me of the charges of negligence, but the Foundation refused me another ship. It was my . . . illness. It spread from my hands, as you can see. Slowly, very slowly. So what remains for me? A hospital cot and a spaceman's pension. Those tons of gold in the sky are cursed, like most great treasures. Somewhere, out in the deeps between the stars, the dust of my crew guards that golden derelict. It belongs to them now . . . all of it.

But the price we pay for treasure is this. Look at me. I look eighty? I'm thirty two. And the bitterest part of the story is that people laugh at me when I tell what happened. They laugh and call me my nickname. Have you heard it?

It's . . . Captain Midas.



"Devil," he said and dug his cigarette into the other's face.

SIGNAL RED

By HENRY GUTH

They tried to stop him. Earth Flight 21 was a suicide run, a coffin ship, they told him. Uranian death lay athwart the space lanes. But Shano already knew this was his last ride.

MERCURIAN NIGHT SETTLED black and thick over the Q City Spaceport. Tentative fingers of light flicked and probed the sky, and winked out.

"Here she comes," somebody in the line ahead said.

Shano coughed, his whole skeletal body jerking. Arthritic joints sent flashes of pain along his limbs. Here she comes, he

thought, feeling neither glad nor sad.

He coughed and slipped polarized goggles over his eyes.

The spaceport emerged bathed in infra red. Hangars, cradles, freighter catapults and long runways stood out in sharp, diamond-clear detail. High up, beyond the cone of illumination, a detached triple row of bright specks—portholes of the liner *Stardust*—sank slowly down.

There was no eagerness in him. Only a tiredness. A relief. Relief from a lifetime of beating around the planets. A life of digging, lifting, lugging and pounding. Like a work-worn Martian camel, he was going home to die.

As though on oiled pistons the ship sank into the light, its long shark-like hull glowing soft and silvery, and settled with a feathery snuggle into the cradle's ribs.

The passenger line quivered as a loud-speaker boomed:

"Stardust, now arrived at Cradle Six! Stardust, Cradle Six! All passengers for Venus and Earth prepare to board in ten minutes."

Shano coughed, and wiped phlegm from his thin lips, his hand following around the bony contours of his face, feeling the hollows and the beard stubble and loose skin of his neck. He coughed and thought of the vanium mines of Pluto, and his gum-clogged lungs. A vague, pressing desire for home overwhelmed him. It had been so long.

"Attention! Attention, Stardust passengers! The signal is red. The signal is red. Refunds now being made. Refunds now. Take-off in five minutes."

The man ahead swore and flicked up an arm. "Red," he groaned. "By the infinite galaxies, this is the last straw!" He charged away, knocking Shano aside as he passed.

Red signal. In bewildered anxiety Shano lifted the goggles from his eyes and stared into the sudden blackness. The red signal. Danger out there. Passengers advised to ground themselves, or travel at their own risk.

He felt the passengers bump and fumble past him, grumbling vexatiously.

A hot dread assailed him, and he coughed, plucking at his chest. Plucking at an urgency there.

Dropping the goggles to his rheumy eyes, he saw that the passenger line had dissolved. He moved, shuffling, to the gate, thrust his ticket into the scanner slot, and pushed through the turnstile when it clicked.

"Flight twenty-one, now arriving from Venus," the loud-speaker said monotonously. Shano glanced briefly upward and saw

the gleaming belly of twenty-one sinking into the spaceport cone of light.

He clawed his way up the gangway and thrust out his ticket to the lieutenant standing alone at the air lock. The lieutenant, a sullen, chunky man with a queer nick in his jawbone, refused the ticket. "Haven't you heard, mister? Red signal. Go on back."

Shano coughed, and peered through the lenses of his goggles. "Please," he said. "Want to go home. I've a right." The nicked jaw stirred faint memories within his glazed mind.

The lieutenant punched his ticket. "It's your funeral, old man."

The loud-speaker blared. *"Stardust, taking off in thirty seconds. The signal is red. Stardust, taking—"*

With the words dinning in his ears, Shano stepped into the air lock. The officer followed, spun wheels, and the lock closed. The outside was shut off.

Lifting goggles they entered the hull, through a series of two more locks, closing each behind them.

"We're afloat," the officer said. "We've taken off." A fleck of light danced far back in his eye. Shano felt the pressure of acceleration gradually increasing, increasing, and hurried in.

CAPTAIN MENTHLO, a silver-mus-tached Jupiterian, broad, huge, yet crushable as a beetle, talked while his hands manipulated a panel of studs in the control room. The pilot, his back encased in leather, sat in a bucket seat before him, listening into earphones.

"Surprised to learn of a passenger aboard," the captain said, glancing briefly sideways. "You're entitled to know of the danger ahead." He flicked a final stud, spoke to the pilot and at last turned a serious, squared face to Shano. "Old man," he said. "There's a Uranian fleet out there. We don't know how many ships in this sector. Flight twenty-one, which just landed, had a skirmish with one, and got away. We may not be so lucky. You know how these Uranian devils are."

Shano coughed, and wiped his mouth. "Dirty devils," he said. "I was driv' off the planet once, before this war started. I

know things about them Uranian devils. Heard them in the mines around. Hears things, a laborer does."

The captain seemed for the first time to realize the social status of his lone passenger, and he became a little gruff.

"Want you to sign this waiver, saying you're traveling at your own risk. We'll expect you to keep to your cabin as much as possible. When the trouble comes we can't bother with a passenger. In a few hours we'll shut down the ship entirely, and every mechanical device aboard, to try to avoid detection." His mustaches rose like two spears from each side of his squared nose as his face changed to an alert watchfulness. "Going home, eh?" he said. "You've knocked around some, by the looks of you. Pluto, from the sound of that cough."

Shano scrawled his signature on the waiver. "Yeah," he said. "Pluto. Where a man's lungs fights gas." He blinked watery eyes. "Captain, what's a notched jaw mean to you?"

"Well, old man," the captain grasped Shano's shoulder and turned him around. "It means somebody cut himself, shaving. You stick tight to your cabin." He nodded curtly and indicated the door.

Descending the companionway to the next deck Shano observed the nick-jawed lieutenant staring out the viewport, apparently idling. The man turned and gripped Shano's thin arm.

"A light?" he said, tapping a cigarette. Shano produced a lighter disk and the chunky man puffed. He was an Earthman and his jaw seemed cut with a knife, notched like a piece of wood. Across the breast of his tunic was a purple band, with the name *Rourke*. "Why are you so anxious to get aboard, old man?" He searched Shano's face. "There's trouble ahead, you know."

Shano coughed, wracking his body, as forgotten memories stirred sluggishly in his mind. "Yup," he said, and jerked free and stumbled down the steel deck.

In his cabin he lay on the bunk, lighted a cigarette and smoked, coughing and staring at the rivet-studded bulkhead. The slow movement of his mind resolved into a struggle, one idea groping for the other.

What were the things he'd heard about nicked jaws? And where had he heard them? Digging ore on Pluto; talk in the pits? Secretive suspicions voiced in smoke-laden saloons of Mars? In the labor gangs of Uranus? Where? Shano smoked and didn't know. But he knew there was a rumor, and that it was the talk of ignorant men. The captain had evaded it. Shano smoked and coughed and stared at the steel bulkhead and waited.

THE ship's alarm clanged. Shano jerked from his bunk like a broken watch spring. He crouched, trembling, on arthritic joints, as a loud-speaker blared throughout the ship.

"All hands! We now maintain dead silence. Close down and stop all machinery. Power off and lights out. An enemy fleet is out there, listening and watching for mechanical and electronic disturbance. Atmosphere will be maintained from emergency oxygen cylinders. Stop pumps."

Shano crouched and listened as the ship's steady drone ceased and the vibrations ceased. The pumps stopped, the lights went out.

Pressing the cold steel bulkhead, Shano heard oxygen hiss through the pipes. Hiss and hiss and then flow soundlessly, filling the cabin and his lungs. He choked.

The cabin was like a mine shaft, dark and cold. Feet pounded on the deck outside.

Shano clawed open the door. He peered out anxiously.

Cold blobs of light, phosphorescent bulbs held in the fists of men, glimmered by. Phosphorescent bulbs, because the power was off. Shano blinked. He saw officers and men, their faces tight and pinched, hurrying in all directions. Hurrying to shut down the ship.

He acted impulsively. A young ensign strode by, drawn blaster in hand. Shano followed him; followed the bluish glow of his bulb, through labyrinthine passages and down a companionway, coughing and leering against the pain in his joints. The blue light winked out in the distance and Shano stopped.

He was suddenly alarmed. The captain had warned him to stay in his cabin. He

looked back and forth, wondering how to return.

A bell clanged.

Shano saw a cold bulb glowing down the passageway, and he shuffled hopefully toward it. The bulb moved away. He saw an indistinct figure disappear through a door marked, ENGINE ROOM.

Shano paused uncertainly at the end of the passageway. A thick cluster of vertical pipes filled the corner. He peered at the pipes and saw a gray box snuggled behind them. It had two toggle switches and a radium dial that quivered delicately.

Shano scratched his scalp as boots pounded on the decks, above and below. He listened attentively to the ship's familiar noises diminishing one by one. And finally even the pounding of feet died out; everything became still. The silence shrieked in his ears.

THE ship coasted. Shano could sense it coasting. He couldn't feel it or hear it, but he knew it was sliding ghost-like through space like a submarine dead under water, slipping quietly past a listening enemy.

The ship's speaker rasped softly. "*Emergency. Battle posts.*"

The captain's voice. Calm, brief. It sent a tremor through Shano's body. He heard a quick scuffle of feet again, running feet, directly overhead, and the captain's voice, more urgently, "Power on. They've heard us."

The words carried no accusation, but Shano realized what they meant. A slip-up. Something left running. Vibrations picked up quickly by detectors of the Uranian space fleet.

Shano coughed and heard the ship come to life around him. He pulled himself out of the spasm, cursing Pluto. Cursing his diseased, gum-clogged lungs. Cursing the Uranian fleet that was trying to prevent his going home—even to die.

This was a strange battle. Strange indeed. It was mostly silence.

Occasionally, as though from another world, came a brief, curt order. "Port guns alert." Then hush and tension.

The deck lurched and the ship swung this way and that. Maybe dodging, maybe

maneuvering—Shano didn't know. He felt the deck lurch, that was all.

"Fire number seven."

He heard the weird scream of a ray gun, and felt the constricting terror that seemed to belt the ship like an iron band.

This was a battle in space, and out there were Uranian cruisers trying to blast the *Stardust* out of the sky. Trying and trying, while the captain dodged and fired back—pitted his skill and knowledge against an enemy Shano couldn't see.

He wanted desperately to help the captain break through, and get to Earth. But he could only cling to the plastic pipes and cough.

The ship jounced and slid beneath his feet, and was filled with sound. It rocked and rolled. Shano caromed off the bulkhead.

"Hold fire."

He crawled to his knees on the slippery deck, grabbed the pipes and pulled himself erect, hand over hand. His eyes came level with the gray metal box behind the pipes. He squinted, fascinated, at the quivering dial needle. "Hey!" he said.

"Stand by."

Shano puzzled it out, his mind groping. He wasn't used to thinking. Only working with his hands.

This box. This needle that had quivered when the ship was closed down . . .

"It's over. Chased them off. Ready guns before laying to. Third watch on duty."

Shano sighed at the sudden release of tension throughout the space liner *Stardust*.

Smoke spewed from his nostrils. His forehead wrinkled with concentration. Those rumors: "Man sells out to Uranus, gets a nick cut in his jaw. Ever see a man with a nick in his jaw? Watch him, he's up to something." The talk of ignorant men. Shano remembered.

He poked behind the pipes and angrily slapped the toggle switches on the box. The captain would only scoff. He'd never believe there was a traitor aboard who had planted an electronic signal box, giving away the ship's position. He'd never believe the babblings of an old man.

He straightened up, glaring angrily. He knew. And the knowledge made him cold and furious. He watched the engine room

emergency exit as it opened cautiously.

A chunky man backed out, holstering a flat blaster. He turned and saw Shano, standing smoking. He walked over and nudged Shano, his face dark. Shano blew smoke into the dark face.

"Old man," said Rourke. "What're you doing down here?"

Shano blinked.

Rourke fingered the nick in his jaw, eyes glinting. "You're supposed to be in your cabin," he said. "Didn't I warn you we'd run into trouble?"

Shano smoked and contemplated the chunky man. Estimated his strength and youth and felt the anger and frustration mount in him. "Devil," he said.

He lunged then, clawing. He dug the cigarette into Rourke's flushed face, and clung to his body. Rourke howled. He fell backward to the deck, slapping at his blistered face. He thrashed around and Shano clung to him, battered, pressing the cigarette relentlessly, coughing, cursing the pain in his joints.

Shano grasped Rourke's neck with his hands. He twisted the neck with his gnarled hands. Strong hands that had worked.

He got up when Rourke stopped thrashing. The face was purple and he was dead. Shano shivered. He crouched in the passageway shivering and coughing.

A tremendous grinding sounded amidships. Loud rending noises of protesting metal. The ship bucked like a hooked fish. Then it was still. An empty clank echoed through the hull. The captain's voice came, almost yelling. "Emergency! Emergency! Back to your posts. Engine room—report! Engine room—"

Shano picked himself off the deck, his mind muddled. He coughed and put a cigarette to his lips, flicking a lighter disk jerkily from his pocket. He blew smoke from his nostrils and heard the renewed pounding of feet. What was going on now?

"Engine room! Your screen is dead! Switch onto loud-speaker system. Engine room!"

Giddily, Shano heard clicks and rasps and then a thick voice, atom motors whirring in the background.

"Selector's gone, sir. Direct hit. Heat ray through the deck plates. We've sealed the tear. Might repair selector in five hours."

Shano coughed and sent a burst of smoke from his mouth.

"Captain!" A rasping, grating sound ensued from a grill above Shano's head, then a disconnected voice. "Get the men out of there. It's useless. Hurry it up!" A series of clicks and the heavy voice of the chief engineer. "Captain! Somebody's smashed the selector chamber. Engine room's full of toxia gas!"

Shano jumped. He prodded the body on the deck with his toe.

The *Stardust's* mechanical voice belated: "Engine room!" It reproduced the captain's heavy breathing and his tired voice. "We're about midway to Venus," it said. "There were two ships and we drove them off. But there may be others. They'll be coming back. They know we've been hit. We have to get away fast!"

Shano could see the captain in his mind, worried, squared face slick with moisture. Shouting into a control room mike. Trying to find out what the matter was with his space ship.

The engineer's answer came from the grill. "Impossible, sir. Engine room full of toxia gas. Not a suit aboard prepared to withstand it. And we have to keep it in there. Selector filaments won't function without the gas. Our only chance was to put a man in the engine room to repair the broken selector valve rods or keep them running by hand."

"Blast it!" roared the captain. "No way of getting in there? Can't you by-pass the selector?"

"No. It's the heart of the new cosmic drive, sir. The fuels must pass through selector valves before entering the tube chambers. Filaments will operate so long as toxia gas is there to burn, and will keep trying to open the valves and compensate for fluctuating engine temperature. But the rod pins have melted down, sir—they're common tungsten steel—and when the rods pull a valve open, they slip off and drop down, useless. It's a mess. If we could only get a man in there he might lift up the dropped end of a rod and slip

it into place each time it fell, and keep the valves working and feeding fuel."

The speaker spluttered and Shano smoked thoughtfully, listening to the talk back and forth, between the captain and the engineer. He didn't understand it, but knew that everything was ended. They were broken down in space and would never make Earth. Those Uranian devils would come streaking back. Catch them floating, helpless, and blast them to bits. And he would never get home to die.

Shano coughed, and cursed his lungs. Time was when these gum-clogged lungs had saved his life. In the Plutonian mines. Gas explosions in the tunnels. Toxia gas, seeping in, burning the men's insides. But with gum-clogged lungs he'd been able to work himself clear. Just getting sick where other men had died, their insides burned out.

Shano smoked and thought.

THEY wouldn't even know, he told himself, squirming through the emergency exit into the engine room, and sealing it after him. And they wouldn't understand if they did. Pink mist swirled about him. Toxia gas. Shano coughed.

He squinted around at the massive, incomprehensible machinery. The guts of the space ship.

Then he saw the shattered, gold-gleaming cylinder, gas hissing from a fine nozzle, and filaments glowing bluish inside it, still working away. He saw five heavy Carrsteel rods hanging useless, on melted-down pins, and the slots their pronged ends hooked into. He looked at his hands, and shook his head.

"One try," he said to himself. "One try, Shano. One important thing in your life. Here's your opportunity. The toxia gas will get you. It'll kill you at this concentration. But you'll last for maybe twelve hours. Another man wouldn't last a minute. Another man's lungs aren't clogged with Juno gum."

He grasped a rod and lifted it, sweating under the weight, and slipped the forked end into its slot. Going home to die, he thought. Well, maybe not going home.

Couldn't remember what Earth looked like anyway.

What was that again? Oh yeah—just lift them up, and when they drop off, lift them up again.

Shano coughed, and lifted the heavy rods into position. One jerked back suddenly and smoothly, and something went, "Pop, pop," behind him and machinery whirled. He lifted the rod and slipped it back on. Another jerked, pulled open a large valve, and dropped off. Shano bent, and lifted, coughing and coughing. He forgot what he was doing, mind blank the way it went when he worked. Just rhythmically fell into the job, the way a laborer does. He waited for a rod to slip and fall, then lifted it up and slipped it in place, skin sweating, joints shooting pain along his limbs. He heard the machinery working. He heard the high, howling whine of cosmic jets. He, Shano, was making the machinery go. He was running the cosmic drive.

A bell clanged somewhere. "Engine room! Engine room! We're under way! What happened?"

Silence, while Shano coughed and made the machinery go, thinking about the Earth he hadn't seen for many years.

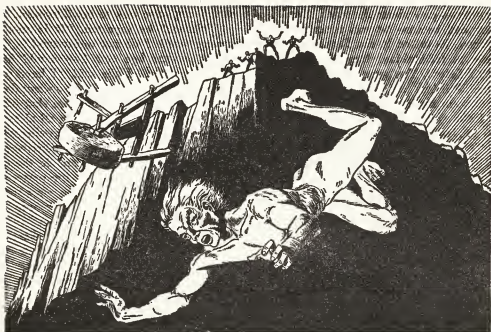
"Captain!" the speaker bawled. "There's a man in there! Working the valve rods! Somebody is in the engine room and the gas isn't . . ."

Shano grinned, feeling good. Feeling happy. Lifting the heavy steel rods, driving the ship. Keeping the jets screaming and hurtling the liner *Stardust* toward Venus. He wondered if they'd found Rourke yet. If he could keep going for twelve hours they would get to Venus. After that . . .

"Home," he coughed. "Hell! Who wants to go home?"

He plucked at his agitated chest, thinking of a whole damn Uranian fleet swooping down on a spot in space, expecting to find a crippled ship there with a spy inside it. And finding nothing. Because of Shano. A useless old man.

Coughing came out all mixed up with laughing.



His thin scream keened away in the distance.

The Wheel Is Death

By ROGER DEE

The little world was quiet at last. Only one thing remained to be done—Gor Zan must be slain, quickly.

HE WAS TOO LATE TO STOP them. Old Kaliz dropped his up-raised arm, and at his signal the four naked under-priests flung the bound body of Gor Zan over the precipice. Ortho heard his friend's thin scream keening away until it dwindled in the distance and the muted roar of the falls boiling at the cliff's bottom floated upward and drowned it.

He turned to run, but the horror of what he had seen numbed his limbs to nightmare slowness. Kaliz and the four under-priests caught him before he had taken a dozen steps.

"You are still a neophyte," old Kaliz said gently. "You have only begun to learn, and so you cannot understand why Gor Zan had to die. The answer lies there."

He pointed a wrinkled hand to the Valley below.

Over the heads of the four priests who squatted on the ledge outside the priest-cave Ortho looked down into the Valley, the lush green miles of its even floor clothed in a faint rosy haze of vapor. The sun sat red upon the western wall; above the eastern rim the rising moon hung warm and turquoise-blue, its great encircling ring pulsing like an aura of living light. Under its glow the Valley-haze turned violet and then blue, and on the heels of its rising came the faint elfin voices of the People, leaving their caves to play in the meadow.

Ortho sat back upon his polished sitting-stone and met the high-priest's eyes defiantly.

"There is no reason down there," he

said sullenly. "It is only the People, coming out to play under the moon. You killed Gor Zan because he was wiser than you, because he talked to the People and made clear to them things they did not understand before. You were jealous of him and you killed him lest he make your own wisdom seem small in the eyes of the People."

Kaliz sighed and seated himself stiffly on his own sitting-stone.

"The young do not learn easily," he said. "But believe this, Ortho—your friend Gor Zan was a snare to the People and a deadly menace to their way of life. We took him from them reluctantly and only as a last resort, before he could start the People again on the bloody path of ambition, progress and the Machine."

Ortho cupped his still beardless chin in his hands and stared disconsolately down into the blue-hazed Valley where the People played.

"Empty talk," he said contemptuously. "Priest-talk—ambition, progress, the Machine! I do not know the words. There is nothing but the Valley and the People, who have always been and who will always be. Your words have no meaning."

"I have taught these others," Kaliz murmured. The blue moonlight pulsed warm across his wrinkled face, made his hooded eyes pools of reflected light. "I can teach you, too. You would know these things soon, because you are almost ready to read the Books; but I shall tell you now, that you may not be rebellious for lack of understanding."

He pointed again, this time at the moon with its restless blue halo.

"It was not always so," he said. His voice softened as his memory drifted back across the ages. "Once it was yellow, pitted and airless and dead, shining only with light reflected from the sun. Men changed that, as they changed the face of their world, by the power of their science, which in the end defeated the aims they strove for and destroyed them almost utterly. The handful that remained of them found haven in the Valley and began a new civilization, which is today the People. This time, being wiser, they outlawed the practice of science."

Under Kaliz' calm assurance Ortho's re-

sentment dwindled, and his loathing of the high-priest gave way to bewilderment.

"Science?" he repeated. "It is another strange word. I do not understand."

"In another age Gor Zan would have been a scientist," Kaliz said. "I have seen them with my own eyes in the ancient days, puttering in tomblike shops that shut other men away from them, denying all pleasure while they spent their lives improving what other scientists had already discovered. They were never satisfied, and in the end it was their insatiable lust for perfection that killed them, that set the very moon aflame and flung mankind back into the savagery from which it had risen."

"For there was a time," he went on sombrely, shifting his sitting-stone to follow Ortho's troubled gaze down into the blue depths of the Valley, "long before my own, when men lived as simply as we, but without our peace and security. The world then was a savage place, full of frightful beasts which killed men for food because they were no more than weaker animals. Men, being weak and soft, sought communal safety in numbers and gained an advantage over the beasts because they developed intelligence and logic by exchanging ideas and experiences."

"They learned to use this intelligence to develop weapons which eventually wiped out the dangerous beasts and made the world safe; but they were not content with safety, and fought savagely among themselves. Nations numbering millions of men came into being and warred with each other, and with each war their ingenuity grew and the deadliness of their weapons kept pace with their ingenuity."

KALIZ was quiet for a moment, listening to the faint laughter of the People that drifted up faintly from the Valley floor.

"Men were not happy then as they are now," he said. "I remember them, Ortho, because I was one of them, and by a miracle escaped the great holocaust that destroyed mankind. Men had developed a weapon whose destructiveness was beyond the power of the mind to conceive, and it escaped control: nation after nation died in a breath, whole continents vanished un-

der the impact of robot missiles whose explosions destroyed matter itself. One of these, perhaps by intent, struck the moon, and its reaction under the moon's lighter gravity set up a conflagration which never went out.

"Those of us who survived the holocaust were greatly changed by the radiations of the explosions, and most of us soon died. I alone, by chance, was rendered deathless. More ages have passed than I can number, but I live on, perhaps eternally, to see that the People do not err and fall again into the trap which science with its Machines would place in their way.

"Gor Zan was a throwback to my own savage day, a natural scientist who believed nothing he was told and reasoned with a deadly logic that nothing created by nature can be perfect, but must be improved by the thought and effort of man. Today we slew him, reluctantly, because he had taken the final irrevocable step that branded him a heretic and an outlaw.

"Gor Zan made a Machine."

He stretched out a hand to Ortho and they rose together, the abashed eyes of the neophyte not meeting those of the high-priest.

"Come," Kaliz said, "and behold the thing with your own eyes. I have kept it

intact to convince you beyond doubt of Gor Zan's heresy."

They went back into the priest-cave, past the long tiers of Books, crumbling and yellow with age, to stand in awed silence over the thing Gor Zan had made. Ortho stared, shivering, feeling the cold aura of unsentient, alien power that radiated from the Machine.

It was a crude affair, built upon two wooden shafts that slanted upward to end in a pair of rough handles. Across them were lashed shorter sticks that supported a woven basket. At the forward end was a thin disc made of wooden segments, a little wooden axle running through the center and holding the disc upright between the joined ends of the shafts.

"Gor Zan tired of making two trips to his cave with firewood and fruit," old Kaliz said sombrely, "so he created a Machine which would carry a greater load than his shoulders would bear. In my own age the thing was called a Wheelbarrow, but the name of it is not important now because there will never be another.

"We will destroy it now, and with its destruction we will forget what Gor Zan had rediscovered, which is the first principle of the Machine that enslaved and then destroyed mankind—the Wheel."

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ACTION ON AZURA

By ROBERTSON OSBORNE

The Others—the Nameless Ones—had tried to conquer this fair and gentle world, searing the very sky with vicious flame, drenching the natives with death. They failed. Then came the Terrans, with a new idea . . . a different weapon . . .



Nestor's blast-rifle roared once, sharply.

ON THE THIRTY-THIRD DAY out of Earth Central, the *Special Agent* heterodyned itself out of w-space and re-entered the normal continuum. The little 1400-ton vessel fell free toward the fifth planet of Procyon for half an hour before planetary drive was applied to slow it into an orbit.

Allan Stuart, linguist, in this maiden mission of CONTACT INCORPORATED, felt seasick again during the period of free fall. Of the six men aboard, he was the only one who hadn't spent at least one hitch in the Solar System Patrol. He was doggedly trying to steady his nerves by floating a row of dictionaries in midair when the intercom startled him. It was the voice of James Gordon, ship's captain and head of the new firm.

"All hands! We start spiraling in shortly and we should land on Azura in about

five hours. Nestor, relieve White in the drive room. The rest of you come on up to Control for a final briefing."

The bony little linguist sighed, put away his books, and unstrapped himself. Nausea made him hiccup. Detouring sadly around the intricate, day-old wreckage of what had been a beautiful cephaloid unit, he swung stiffly out of the lab. In the corridor he had to squeeze past a badly torn-up wall. Dan Rogers, one of the two planetary scouts, shut off a welding torch and coasted along with him.

"Little old piece of nickel-iron sure raised heck, didn't it, Mr. Stuart?" drawled the scout. "Come out into normal space for two minutes to get a bearing, and—WHAM!" He propelled himself along with the effortless efficiency of a man accustomed to doing without gravity.

Stuart, correcting course with some dif-



ficulty, took a moment to answer. "Hm? Oh, the meteor! Yes, indeed it did. My leg is still stiff, and of course half my equipment is just junk now. But I guess we were rather fortunate at that, since none of us was killed. All the way to Procyon . . . three point four parsecs. Dear me!" He clucked, shaking his head, and wondered again how the other five men in the

crew could take these things so casually.

He drifted into the control room with Rogers and hovered near the desk. Brettner, the other scout, came in playing some outlandish sort of guitar; White, engineer and assistant astrogator, joined him in a final caterwauling chorus of "The Demon of Demos."

The ship's captain swung his chair to

face them, his angular face folding into a responsive grin. Then he waved a tele-tape at the four men and looked more serious.

"Here's Patrol's latest summary of the situation," he announced. "Still no response from Procyon V, otherwise known as Azura. No activity in the ruined cities. No further clashes with traders, because the traders have given up. However, the natives are still taking pot-shots from the woods at any scouting parties that dare to sit down on the planet. Every attempt at contact is fiercely rejected.

"The Patrol lads, naturally, are forbidden to shoot back, at least until they find out what this is all about . . . which, of course, is where our own little expedition of specialists comes in. Incidentally, it seems fairly certain the natives know nothing of radio, so we'll be safe in using microwave to feel our way down in the dark."

He accepted a cigarette from Rogers and nodded toward a month-old report titled: Unofficial Data as of 31 October 2083; Procyon V (Azura).

"I know we have precious little to go in there with, but that's the situation. A million credits from Earth Central, if we establish friendly contact." He smoked a while, grey eyes on the ceiling. Then, as nobody spoke, he added: "The Patrol has had two more skirmishes, not far from here, with what we've called the Invader culture. None of their ships has been captured, but it's fairly certain they're the same vicious crowd we've fought near Rigel, Alpha Centauri, and so on. They seem to be heading this way again slowly. Here . . ."

HE handed out half a dozen photographs of strange-looking spacecraft. "They're undoubtedly the gang that blew hell out of Azura a few years ago, before we got here, and gave the natives such a violent dislike of strangers. The Invader's weapons are somewhat inferior to ours, but he apparently has the considerable advantage of having superior position in regard to bases . . . particularly around here. The patrol simply can't stand up to a determined attack in this region unless a

base is made available, preferably on Azura."

Brettner said, softly, "That's what we're really after, isn't it? Nobody's handing us a million credits just for cultural purposes."

The leader of the expedition nodded. "Yep. Once we talk to these Azurans, I think we can convince them we all have a common enemy. An enemy who seems to enjoy smashing things just for fun. I have a hunch the Azurans expect the Invaders back, too . . . that might account for their apparent determination to remain hidden." He reached for the log. "Incidentally, what's the latest on the damage situation?"

Stuart shook his head unhappily and brushed hair out of his eyes. "One cephaloid is completely ruined. It was the one I had trained to translate into Universal Speech from whatever other language would be fed into it later. I was going to teach it what Azuran I could pick up and use it as a direct interpreter. We have to use Universal Speech, you see, because cephaloids simply can't handle homonyms such as 'see' and 'sea,' or 'threw' and 'through.' However," his worried look lessened, "the multiple analyzer is all right. And the stand-by, originally conditioned only for generalized language response, has been restrained in Universal Speech and will learn Azuran from the analyzer."

He managed a feeble smile. "After all, the natives are manlike, and we know they had a city culture much like ours, so there is a good possibility of our finding mutually intelligible symbols. And we know what their language sounds like, thanks to the trader who got away with a recording."

White spoke up. "I hope you weren't counting too much on the portable tele-view, Mr. Stuart. It's a total loss. So is the long-range microphone. It's going to be tough to study their language at a distance." He looked at Gordon. "The ship is okay, chief, except for the debris we're still cutting away. All the animals are dead; I guess you knew that. And all we've salvaged from the jeep is the power unit and one repulsor. We'll have to walk where we can't use the scout-ship."

Brettner, when the captain looked at

him, said quietly: "We're awful low on food. Just about enough to get us back, with three or four days to spare. Can't we eat any of this Azuran stuff?"

Gordon shook his head. "The water and air are all right, but there's no food for us down there. Good thing, in a way."

He laughed at the surprised expressions. "All Terrestrial life is based on complexes of iron, magnesium, or copper, but Azuran life seems to be built on cobalt complexes. Consequently both sides are immune to the diseases of the other. You remember the terrible plagues that hit the Terrestrial port areas in the old days, and the grim effects of our landings on Alpha Centauri III and Proxima II. But the biostat labs report that Terrestrial and Azuran tissue cultures have only a toxic effect on each other . . . no parasitic viability whatever."

He looked up at the chronometer. "About time to begin our spiral, if we're to land before daybreak in that area we picked out. Let's get some sleep. White, you'll relieve me for a couple of hours, soon as we've established our trajectory."

STUART, on the way out, picked up the sheaf of papers summarizing what was known about Azura. He strapped into his bunk absent-mindedly and lay there trying to visualize his first non-solar planet. Many kinds of intelligent animals, the reports agreed. Evidently a mutation leading to intelligence had occurred quite early in the diversification of the animal phyla.

One of the traders, said the report, claimed he had even learned to converse in a limited way with what he called monkey-rats. These had about the intelligence of a five-year-old human, and displayed the group cooperation common to many Azuran forms.

Too bad the trader hadn't been able to stay there longer. He had finally found some of the natives, just at the time they had found him. He was preparing to leave his ship and accept their thanks for the fine gifts he had set out, when gifts, trees, and nearby boulders began to blow up all around. He had taken off without further discussion.

6-Planet-Fall

Four other traders and three Patrol ships had failed. A small freighter, landing to make emergency repairs, had disappeared. The only weapon the natives had, apparently, was a disrupter of some sort, with a range of only two or three kilometers. But the wreckage of the cities showed plainly that the invaders had used weapons of the same type as Earth's, probably with a range of hundreds of kilometers. That meant—

He awoke, struggling, as if from a nightmare. The klaxon was sounding off, jarring his teeth. Gordon's slightly nasal voice came over the loudspeaker: "Landing stations, everybody. We're sitting down in fifteen minutes."

The linguist hastily unfastened his safety belts, rolled out, and scrambled into primary space gear. "Secondary equipment?" he asked Rogers, who was getting dressed beside him.

"Naw, no armor. Leave your oxygen off, too. This is a Class E planet, just like home."

Stuart scrambled down to the control room and strapped himself in beside the stern-view screen. He could hear White and Brettner in the drive room, sleepily arguing about who had mislaid the coffee jug. Such nonchalance! he thought. Trembling with excitement, he nearly dropped his camera. "I wonder how soon I can get some pictures," he muttered. "If I could only photograph our landing . . . that would really liven up the next meeting of the Philological Society!" He had already taken over a hundred pictures of the expedition, and his hobby was the subject of much ribbing from the rest of the six-man corporation.

Gordon looked over from the control board and interrupted his thoughts. "Stuart! See anything out there?"

A dial over the linguist's head indicated only a hundred meters to go. His screen showed a dark landscape, illuminated by two of the four moons. "Tree directly below," he announced. "Better move to the red side about twenty meters."

The vessel shifted slightly and eased down smoothly under Gordon's practised handling. Relays clacked; the drive hummed softly.

Suddenly a rough branch scraped along the side, making metallic echoes in the double walls. Seconds later the ship settled with a gritty crunching. A few kicks of the drive leveled it off.

II

THERE WAS PROFOUND SILENCE for a moment after the drive died away. Someone yelled "Wahoo!" Then Rogers came clattering down the ladder. He beckoned to Stuart, who was already climbing out of the seat eagerly.

"Time for the landing party," said the scout. He eyed the camera. "Remember now, play your cards close to your chest. Don't go skittering off to take pictures. First we patrol once around the ship, then we get the camouflage nets pegged down, right away. Then we sit tight 'till we've had a good look around in daylight."

As they approached the arms locker, they found Nestor drawing out three blast rifles. He held out two of them. "Your weapons, gentlemen," said the chubby engineer, bowing. "I'm guarding the airlock while you're out there. And next time we cut cards for this little privilege, I'm going to shuffle the deck myself. Six years in the Patrol before this trip, and I've been first-to-land only once in my life!"

The linguist smiled, feeling his taut nerves relax a bit. He pushed the Outside Test button beside the lock at the end of the corridor. A green light flashed. "Air's already been okayed," Nestor told him.

Stuart pushed another button. The inner door withdrew from its permoid gasket and swung aside. The three men clanked into the echoing airlock chamber, where a touch on a third stud slid shut the inner door and opened the outer.

The night lay mysterious before them, full of exotic odors, unfamiliar sounds, and double shadows. The slender linguist clambered like an eager monkey down the fin rungs and stood inhaling deeply.

He was adjusting his camera when Rogers whispered in his ear, "Come on, let's make a tour around the clearing." Into his microphone, the scout reported: "Beginning our circuit, chief. Circling counterclockwise."

Rifles unslung, the two began walking cautiously. They had gone about halfway, and Stuart was studying the two moons, when his feet were abruptly yanked out from under him and he fell to the ground. The patch of pinkish grass under him seemed to ripple, rolling him over and over helplessly until he was brought up against a rounded hummock. Before he could struggle to his feet, he came floundering back again to be dumped at the edge of the patch. Sitting up dazedly, he found Rogers looking for something to shoot at.

"What the devil happened?" whispered the scout. Gordon's voice came over the earphones: "What's going on down there? All I can hear up here in the turret is grunts and whispers, but what I see sure looks screwy!"

Stuart got up lamely, rubbing his sore leg. "I was sniffed at and rejected, in a manner of speaking," he answered. "Watch." He drew his hand gun, which happened to be the most convenient thing, and tossed it on the animated grass before the flabbergasted scout could stop him. Immediately it was whisked away to the central hump, brushed with feelers, and sent tumbling back to his feet. "A most intriguing experience," murmured the linguist, studying the pink grass with his head cocked to one side. "I shall have to try it again when there's more time." He picked up the gun and limped away on patrol.

Rogers, with an expression of surprised scorn and amusement on his handsome face, explained briefly to Gordon what had happened. As he caught up with Stuart, he glanced toward the nose of the *Special Agent*. "See anything yet, chief?"

In the nose turret, two gun barrels continued their sweep. "Nope," came back Gordon's voice. There's a broad prairie just beyond the trees on the 'East' side of this clearing, if you remember. Plain as day in this double moonlight. Almost looks like my home state, except for a few hills of that phosphorescent coral rock. Maybe —HEY! Some kind of critters running toward the hills! About five kilometers away. Flashes . . ." He broke off, as if absorbed in watching.

THE two men on the ground slowly continued their patrol, listening intently. In about fifteen seconds, above the faint rustling of the leaves in the pre-dawn breeze, they heard far-off snarling roars, mingled with crackling explosions. Almost total silence followed, as if the whole forest were listening. "All quiet," Gordon reported after a while. "Must have been what the traders called hell-cats, attacking some native settlement. Looks like we made a fair guess about where to find some natives."

"We also know where they keep some of their popguns," added Rogers sarcastically.

Gordon's voice chuckled. "Patrol says the only known weapon has an apparent range of two or three kilometers at most, and probably is not portable."

The scout looked skeptical. "Patrol says," he repeated sourly. "Apparently, probably, maybe. I notice our old buddies haven't cared to get within a hundred kilometers of said popgun."

When the tour around the ship had been completed, Rogers looked up. "Okay, chief. Ready for the nets."

Far up in the nose appeared a black hole. White climbed out and spread a conical camouflage net over the nose. Then he ducked back into the ship. "Here comes the first strip," said Gordon. "I hope this gimmick works!" A slot opened behind the skirt of the conical net, and a sheet of neolon camouflage unrolled downward. Rogers seized the bundle of stakes at its lower end and had the strip pegged down in a few seconds, with willing but ineffectual help from the inexperienced Stuart.

"All right so far," the scout reported. "Another strip came down. Stuart grabbed the stakes, then put them down to rearrange the rifle slung across his back. Suddenly there was a blur of movement and the stakes disappeared around a fin.

Rogers, carrying the rubber mallet, walked up and nudged him. "Come on! Dawn's about to break, laddie. What are you staring at?" His own eyes widened as the bundle of stakes came back and dropped near his feet. He whipped out a flashlight and revealed a pair of "monkey-rats" scurrying away. He laughed and shook

his head. "Things around here have a cockeyed way of putting back what they don't want. I suppose these fellers were after metal, like Venus blacksmith lizards."

The two men resumed working, and at length the entire ship was tented. Not long after they had finished, the light was strong enough to show the beady-eyed little monkey-rats sitting nearby, watching curiously. The fearless creatures, as large as cocker spaniels, were an indeterminate red-gray in color, four-legged, and had two six-fingered tentacles where Stuart expected a muzzle. Bright black eyes looked out from under bony ridges. The monkey-rats carried short spears, and seemed to have pouches slung on their backs.

"Too bad we can't feed 'em," murmured the scout. "I bet we can make friends with them. We better explore a little more, though, first." Stuart strolled with him to where a narrow neck of turt led from the clearing out to the prairie. A brook followed this little alley into the woods.

Rogers pointed to the near bank, where a miniature scaffolding of bright orange and blue matchsticks stood a few centimeters high. "Construction plant," said the linguist, remembering a trader's description. Nearby were three mossbacks, looking like turtles with tufts of green on their backs. "Possibly symbiotic," Stuart thought to himself. The creatures dabbled their forelegs in the water and blinked sleepily.

The monkey-rats, following the men, apparently discovered the mossbacks just then; there was a sudden squirrel-like chittering sound as one of them pointed with a tentacle. Immediately two small spears flashed through the early morning light and chunked into one of the mossbacks. The creature squawked once and fell over; its companions looked at it stupidly for a moment, then dove clumsily into the brook. The monkey-rats dashed over to their prey, seized it with their tentacles, and began to hustle it toward the nearby trees.

WITHOUT warning, a sky-colored creature like a hawk swooped over them and dropped a rock. One of the monkey-rats was hit in the leg and fell

sprawling. The other whistled with rage and hurled an ineffectual spear. The hawk came back a moment later and began to bomb them with more rocks. The injured one was being half-carried by its companion, and both were screaming angrily.

Rogers scowled at the battle. "Looks like he doesn't want to leave his friend," he growled. Suddenly he whipped out a hunting-knife, aimed for an imperceptible split second, and let fly. The hawk was slashed open down the belly from head to tail. It flopped heavily onto the patch of pink grass, snapping with vicious grey teeth in dying hatred. The uninjured monkey-rat ran to retrieve the knife.

The two men went to look at the wounded one and found it dragging a bleeding hind leg. It seemed especially shocking to Stuart, somehow, that the blood was red, although of a more brilliant shade than that of Terrestrial mammals. The creature turned to face the men, waving a spear defensively and shrilling for help. Its companion came charging up with the knife and two spears. The two forms of life eyed each other for a moment.

"Here's your opportunity to make friends with them," urged Gordon over the radio. "They seem accustomed to man-like beings. Maybe they can be of some use to us. Worth trying, anyway."

The scout squatted and made soothing sounds. Stuart backed away a few steps, so as to represent less of a threat, and began taking pictures as unobtrusively as possible.

Rogers studied the situation in a moment, then extended his empty hands, palms up, in response to a whispered suggestion from the semanticist. Both monkey-rats cocked their heads and watched him sharply, murmuring to each other.

Moving slowly as Stuart directed, the scout tore a strip of bandage from his first-aid packet and allowed it to be examined. He reached for one of the wooden spears, needle-tipped with something like obsidian, but it was withdrawn hastily. He broke off a small branch from a nearby bush and tried to splint the broken leg. The creature squealed and snapped at him, but neither monkey-rat threatened him with a weapon. They seemed more curious than afraid.

Nonplussed for a moment, the Earthman whistled softly, thinking. "Give them your other knife," suggested Stuart. The scout drew it out and dropped it hastily before a spear could be launched at him.

Two knives! The creatures examined them with obvious pleasure, testing the blades and inspecting them closely. Again Rogers reached out; this time his touch was tolerated. "Warm-blooded," he said quietly into his microphone. "Feels like two bones in the upper leg." He succeeded in straightening the limb and tying it up. Then he pantomined carrying the victim and pointed into the woods. The other monkey-rat pushed the injured one toward him and made tentacle motions which evidently meant "yes." He picked up the one with the broken leg, carried it a short distance into the woods, and set it down. The other followed, bristling with knives and spears. Stuart came behind at a discreet distance, observing carefully and making notes. Occasionally he snapped a picture.

The scout poured some water into the palm of his hand and offered it. The injured animal shot out a tubular orange tongue and sucked up the water. The two men were trying to establish further communication when suddenly their earphones crackled.

"You men outside! Stand by the neck of the clearing! There's been some shooting over near those coral rocks, and here comes a native hell-for-leather with three hell-cats after him. Heading for the clearing, I think. Try to catch him . . . he seems to be unarmed. We'll get out and hold off the hell-cats from up here!"

III

ROGERS WAS BELLY-DOWN IN the grass at one side of the entrance before Gordon finished talking. Stuart dashed after him, noticing absently as he passed the pink grass that it was churning and enveloping the carcass of the dead hawk. He reached the edge of the clearing and took up a position across the brook from Rogers. He could see nothing but dust through the grass and heavy scrub. The canteen gouged into his flank, and his holster seemed caught in a root. He strug-

gled to get the blast-rifle unslung from his back, wishing for the twentieth time that he had had at least a little experience at this sort of thing. Just one hitch in the Patrol, for instance . . .

The radio broke in on his whispered swearing. "You might have to do some shooting down there. These machine-guns may not stop all the hell-cats dead in their tracks, but I don't want to use anything bigger . . . no use letting the neighborhood know what we've got."

A few seconds later the native came pounding desperately through the alley into the clearing. "Hold him!" yelled the scout. Stuart sprang to his feet with a leveled rifle and confronted the astounded humanoid, who collided with a tree and stopped. Nestor came dodging out through the nets to cover the prisoner with another gun. The brilliant red manlike creature, obviously understanding the weapons, still tried to edge away from the squalling roars of the hell-cats not far behind on the prairie.

The twin sixty-millimeter guns in the nose burst out with a clatter. The noise of the exploding projectiles was deafening. Clumps of dirt and scrub flew high into the air. Then Nestor's blast-rifle roared once, sharply.

Abruptly there was silence. The Azuran had obviously discovered the ship behind the camouflage; he stared at it, blinked, and stared again, as though in disbelief. Stuart began taking pictures of him. "No more cats," came Gordon's voice. "They were bunched up and Nestor got 'em all. Ah, I notice our new friend has seen through the camouflage net."

The native's reaction was sudden, unexpected. He shuddered and slumped to the ground, a picture of dejection. His tentacles were limp. Nothing would induce him to communicate. At length Stuart offered water; the native suddenly arose, as if in a hopeless rage, knocked the canteen aside, and kicked the linguist's injured leg. Then the red being sank to the ground again.

"Damn!" growled Stuart through clenched teeth. He rubbed his leg. "I suppose he thinks we're the Invaders, coming back to ravage his people again. Either he

never saw the Invaders himself, or we happen to resemble them. Or maybe the terror of the invasion was so great that a serious semantic confusion exists, labelling all strangers as Bad. Well, at any rate, I'll have to go through some semantic analysis to establish any rapport at all." Meditating on the problem, he sent Nestor back to the ship for drawing materials, and bent over to retrieve the canteen. The native immediately knocked him flat and fled into the woods.

Rogers started after the Azuran, unslinging his gun, but Gordon spoke up from the airlock, where he had been about to climb down to the ground. "Dan! Get out of those woods, you half-wit! Let him go; you can't possibly catch him. Anyway, we may be able to see where he goes, if he breaks out into open country again. White, will you keep an eye on the edge of the woods from up there? Be ready to man the 'scope. I'll be right up."

Nestor sat down beside the linguist a few minutes later and held out a cup of fragrant coffee. "Here, Mr. Stuart. I figured you guys could use breakfast better than drawing materials right now. Feel okay?"

Stuart sipped and nodded gratefully. "Mmm. Yes, fine, thanks."

The plump little flight engineer handed him a sandwich. "You're due for relief about now anyway. The boss and I will be out here, and White and Brettner inside. You and Rogers can sleep a while."

The linguist leaned back against a tree and lit a cigarette. "Has the native showed up again?" he asked his microphone.

White answered. "Yeah. He high-tailed it across the prairie and disappeared among the coral rocks. Chief says for you to come in, Stuart; he wants to know what you found out."

STUART picked up his rifle, canteen, camera, and cup. He wondered vaguely, as he trudged wearily over to the ship, how he had gotten so tired. Then he realized that, like the others, he had gotten only five hours' sleep in the past two nights. Procyon was yellow-white and hot on his back, even through the netting, as he clambered up the fin rungs. He felt sleepy.

In the captain's crowded little cabin he dropped into a chair and yawned. Gordon stretched, scratching lazily, and grinned at him. "Bored, on your first day ashore?"

The linguist smiled ruefully. "Tired, yes, but hardly bored. I don't mind admitting the first few hours have been rather disappointing. We had a native right here, I stood face to face with him, and we even saved his life . . . well, no use yowling about it. I presume he's gone off to warn the others now. Our element of surprise, as you fellows say, is lost." He brushed the hair out of his eyes. "What shall we do about it, Gordon?"

The leader drummed on the desk a while. "I dunno. This sort of situation was never covered in Patrol courses. Maybe the General Staff studies this stuff, but I was just a line officer, like the other guys. If you remember, we figured we'd sort of make up our operations plan as we went along. You probably know as much about it as we do, from all your reading. Nothing predictable about any of this; we just have to react to whatever develops. What would you suggest?"

"Um. Well, I've a half-formed scheme for—er, seizing the bull by the horns. The natives are certain to react immediately, either by attacking us or by disappearing again. I feel that we should assume the initiative as soon as possible, without waiting for them to maneuver one of their weapons within range of us."

"How do we assume the initiative?"

"Yes, exactly—how?" The semanticist shook his head. "I'll have to sleep on it at least a little while, Gordon. Right now I feel unable to think. But somehow we have to convey to the Azurans the knowledge that we are friendly. "We'll have to find some way of representing the idea to them."

"Drop leaflets," suggested Gordon, wryly. "Or put up one of those billboards they used to have all over a hundred years ago. Everybody in the universe must have become accustomed to some kind of advertising by now!" He laughed heartily. "Okay, Stuart. Go fall into your bunk. Let's hope you wake up with a good idea!"

The thoughtful little language expert

got up to leave. "Billboard. Billboard . . . there may be something in that, even if you were joking."

His musings were broken off by the alarm bell and the intercom's squawk. "All hands! Battle stations! Chief, three natives just popped up from a hole in the ground about two hundred meters away. Strong radar indication."

As Stuart ran down to his post at the airlock, he heard Gordon's calm voice from the intercom. "All right, Brettner. Keep them covered, but don't fire."

At the lock, the linguist remembered to punch the personnel buttons as the men climbed in, out of breath and swearing. He pushed the stud beside his own name last and shut the lock as the "All Aboard" shone green.

Gordon spoke again, apparently to someone in the control room with him. "They've evidently lugged a disrupter or something along a tunnel. Seem to have a couple of big beasts of burden carrying a gadget . . . looks like one of those old pack howitzers. Let's wait 'till they get it nearly assembled, so we can get an idea of—hup! Let's GO!"

STUART had forgotten to buckle his safety straps. He just had time to grab a stanchion when the violent acceleration tripled his weight and nearly threw him to the floor. No more than a heart-beat later, there was a muffled boom from outside the ship, and a section of blazing tree went rocketing past the glassite window.

After a few seconds' acceleration he felt the ship take on a horizontal component. The pressure eased off. He got up from his hands and knees and adjusted the periscope controls until he got a view of the ground. There was a group of burning trees several kilometers below, sliding rapidly to the east. Several times the scenery shifted rapidly as the ship zigzagged.

As he swung the 'scope, Stuart was thunderstruck to discover a hole blasted in the edge of a fin, not four meters away from where he stood. Shreds of charred camouflage netting fluttered in tangled strings.

On the intercom, White's voice broke the tense silence. "Gimme that again, slowly, somebody. What happened, anyway?"

Gordon answered. "That must have been a tunnel they came out of, right at the edge of the woods. Maybe they use it to get home if hell-cats happen to catch them out on the prairie. That fellow we caught today was probably heading for it, hoping to lose the cats in the woods first."

After a moment, he added, "Anyway, they showed up with a heavy weapon and nearly got us. Patrol guessed wrong about its portability, and I guessed wrong about its operation."

Stuart commented, "Good thing someone happened to be on duty in the turret, and we were able to take off on such short notice."

"*Happened!*" barked the captain. "Mr. Stuart, that's the first rule of *any* ship landing on territory listed as 'unsafe', and it 'happens' to be Rules Seven through Sixteen of the Patrol Regulations!"

Brettner eased the linguist's embarrassment by changing the subject a little. "Did you all see the colossal helpers they had carrying that weapon? Must be what the traders called heffalumps . . . I thought the pictures were fakes. Those critters practically did the shooting themselves, and they were talking to the natives! This is some planet—everybody talks to everybody except us!"

Gordon spoke again. "White, I want you to rig up a mosaic alarm with controls in the turret, Number One Lock, and control room . . . before tonight, if possible. Jury-rig it, just so it goes off when anything larger than a mossback moves near the ship. Get as much range as you can."

"That means dismantling the space-probe and comparator, boss. Not enough spare checkerboards to scan three hundred and sixty degrees with a decent vertical coverage. And for stereo-perception, so the thing can discriminate between a nearby leaf and a far-away heffalump—"

"All right, do the best you can. Can you hook it up with an infra-red snooper for night work? I don't believe the natives can see infra-red . . . I hope. Procyon's

a little farther toward the blue than Sol is."

"I'll see what I can do. Can't get very good resolution with the electro-optical stuff we have for infra-red. We had to weed out four tons, you know, and the Hollmann scanners are three and a half parsecs back, in our shop."

Stuart noticed that the ship's course had steadied. A look through the 'scope showed the recently-abandoned clearing now swinging under the stern again, far below. He was about to take a picture of it when Gordon called him.

"Stuart, will you go to the drive room and give Nestor a hand? He's scanning the area with micro-wave, and I want you to use the stern-view telescope. Those characters may have decided to go back to their base without using the tunnel; maybe we can keep out of sight and get a good fix on where they hole up."

THE linguist retracted the periscope and saw to it that the guard plates slid over the outer lens. Then he dodged through the radiation trap into the darkened drive room. He was wondering how to strap himself into the seat without taking off all his photographic gear, when Nestor, peering into the radar screen, snapped his fingers.

"Got a blip, Gordon," said the engineer with suppressed excitement. "One metallic object about the size of a foot-locker, maybe a little bigger. Boy, do those rocks show up! Must be nearly all metal."

In a moment the leader answered. "I believe I see something. Awkward angle, though, on this turret telescope. How about you, Stuart?"

"No, frankly, I—"

Gordon cut in. "What magnification are you using?"

"Let me see . . . all I can get—sixty-four diameters."

"Too much; cut it down to twelve. Center your 'scope. Now look at the cross-hair grids. Find the lower part of F-7; you should see something around there."

"More likely F-6 from here," put in Nestor. "That's where my indication is."

"Oh, yes! I see them. Three natives and two . . . my goodness, those heff-

alumps are big! Almost as big as elephants!"

Gordon answered, "Yes, and apparently considerably more useful. Well, keep a sharp watch on the group. Let me know where they go, and be sure you mark the spot on a large-scale sketch or photo. I've got to send off a report to Patrol; we're keeping them posted on every development."

"Like a bomb-defusing squad," said Nestor hollowly. "The next crew will take up where we left off, see?"

The ship, swinging slowly ahead of the little raiding party, came to a stop about six kilometers above and slightly beyond the coral rocks.

White spoke over the intercom. "I don't think they'll see us here. We're in the sun. But keep yourselves strapped in, gang; we're going to move in a hurry if they point that thing at us. You guys below let me know if they do anything suspicious. I can't see too much on the control room screens."

In the drive room, the power hummed softly. Relays clicked occasionally as the minutes passed. The creatures on the ground entered a faint trail winding among the hills of bright coral rock. Now and then one of the heffalumps stopped and adjusted the load on his back, using the middle two of his six limbs. Nestor nudged the language expert's arm.

"Looks like they're getting close to home. Better get set to take some pictures."

Stuart nodded, having already picked up a plate magazine, and loaded the camera box on the side of the telescope. He adjusted the controls from time to time with nervous delicacy, occasionally tapping the shutter button. Suddenly he switched to higher magnification, exclaiming, "There they go! Into that cave!" He took three pictures in rapid succession at different magnifications. He also banged his nose hard on the eyepiece, and wondered some hours later how it came to be so tender.

THERE was a clatter of feet on the steel ladder. Gordon came running over to him, an unfinished report in one hand and a half-eaten hamburger in the other. "Lessee," he demanded.

The linguist showed him. Only the cave mouth could be seen now, black in the hot sunlight. It was halfway up a hill of dense coral, and was protected from the front by another hill.

The chief took a bite of hamburger and grinned at Stuart. "This is a bit of luck," he said happily through the mouthful. "We wouldn't have found that hide-out in ten years if they hadn't taken a pot-shot at us!"

Nestor exhaled cigarette smoke, looking cynical. "Swell. What do we do now? Wave a hankie at them?"

Gordon's expression became less cheerful. "We don't know yet. Things have moved a little fast. But whatever we do, we'll have to get it done fast. You guys might as well know now what came in a little while ago on the radio." He drew a deep breath. "An Invader base has been discovered—within striking distance of this area. It's a jolt, of course, but at least we've finally discovered a base of theirs. Earth Central says either we close this deal in four days or the planet will have to be taken over the hard way."

Stuart shook his head sadly, thinking of the already-ruined cities below. "Our little firm had better live up to its name," he said.

Gordon nodded. "A task force is already on the way."

Brettner had come cat-footed down the ladder. "There's one way to hustle things up," he growled, patting his hip holster. "I wish you'd let me blister their stern-plates a little. Little old Frontier Lawyer here would teach 'em some manners right now!"

Stuart repressed a shudder.

The captain strode over and confronted the scout with a frown. "That's what we're here to avoid, Mr. Brettner, and you know it. Our weapons are purely for defense, and there'd be hell raised if we harmed any natives. If we got out of here alive, we'd lose our million credits and all our expenses, as well as being tried for unauthorized warlike acts." He sounded hoarse with fatigue and irritation. "Get over any belligerent ideas you may have. That goes for all of you—at least on this trip."

He looked sternly at the group a moment, then nodded toward the ladder. "Let's go have a conference. Nestor, will you stay here and keep a sharp eye on that hideout?"

The chubby engineer leaned back in the seat, swung the eyepiece over into a comfortable position, and sighed. "Yeah, all right. Somebody better bring me some food before long, though. I'm dying."

IV

UP IN THE "conference room", the men gathered about Gordon at the controls. He checked the autopilot and sat drumming his fingers on the desk. Finally he looked squarely at the language expert. "Mr. Stuart . . . it seems fairly obvious now that the outcome of this entire expedition depends almost solely on you. You're the one who knows how to convey ideas, probably as well as any human being alive, according to the information we got before we asked you to join us. All the rest of us can do is run this ship and make like space-fighters."

He raised a hand at Stuart's beginning protest, and went on. "Let me finish my little speech. You're trained for this sort of thing, even if you do lack non-Terrestrial experience. You figured out the elements of the Alpha Centauri II and IV languages from nothing but sound movies, a few years back. Now, what I'm getting at is this: you tell us what has to be done, and we'll try to figure out a way to do it. We're starting from scratch, of course; that meteor, by a million-to-one chance, ruined all our previous plans."

Stuart pulled at his ear a moment. "Well, all those plans were designed to give me at least the minimum amount of observation I'd need to prepare a friendly message. Now, while my stock of Azuran symbols is still zero, we've gained some information. It's too bad we lost the horses and bloodhounds, for the combination can't be beaten when it's a matter of finding someone in hiding. However, we do know where at least three natives are. And personally, I don't regret it a bit that I'll not make use of those hasty riding lessons."

He paused, and White spoke up. "Even if we do know where some of them are, I don't see how we can use Plan One. How can we set up hidden microphones and telicons, when the ruddy natives live in a cave?"

Brettner, looking disgusted, added, "Even when we catch one of the critters by dumb luck, he won't talk. Trained not to. And that tears up the second plan."

The captain nodded. "And our third scheme . . . to watch and wait, using long-range equipment, and play for the breaks. That sure seemed like a flexible plan. But of course it was blown all over the Milky Way along with our food. Anyway, the news from Patrol makes speed essential."

There was glum silence for a while. Then Rogers offered, "There must be some way we can use our knowledge of where at least three of them are hiding—even if the place is defended with a natural barricade and a souped-up pack howitzer."

After a thoughtful moment, the little language expert cleared his throat hesitantly. "Er—I should like to suggest something . . ." They all looked at him, making him feel rather self-conscious, but he went on. "You said something about an old-fashioned billboard, Gordon, that got me thinking. I have a good many pictures of the expedition and our activities—" he reddened, remembering the frequent ribbings about his photographic activity—"and I can make a few sketches for the rest of it. You see, I was thinking we could sneak down there at night and leave a series of pictures where the natives would find them in the morning."

He was talking rapidly now, full of steam, pacing back and forth. "The pictures would show that we are *not* the Invaders, that we are friendly—I took pictures of Rogers helping the monkey-rats, for instance—and then we could have a couple of pictures of Terrestrials and Azurans exchanging gifts." He stopped, embarrassed, wondering whether his scheme sounded naive to these practical men. "It—it's been tried before with considerable success . . . in some cases."

Gordon thought it over a while, rubbing the stubble on his cheeks. "Might work," he mused aloud. "What about setting up

an automatic-sequence gimmick of some kind, controlled from here while we watch their reaction with a telescope? We could turn the pages, see? . . . or should we just tack up a string of pictures along the path?"

Rogers sat forward. "Machine might be better, if we can rig it up soon enough. Separate pictures might get blown away or something, for all we know, or some kind of critter might destroy 'em."

STUART stopped pacing and squinted at the ceiling. "Yes, I like the machine. We could include a little pick-up unit so I could record and analyze their comments, knowing just what they were looking at. That would really help a lot." He snapped his fingers, struck with inspiration. "What about ending the little show with a real surprise? A gift that would really demonstrate our good intentions?"

What did he consider a suitable gift? "A blast-rifle!" he answered boldly.

"What the devil!" exclaimed Gordon. The others indicated various degrees of consternation. They stared at Stuart as if he had suggested turning pirate. But he showed a firmness that was new to them—and to himself.

"Nothing else will do the trick as simply and surely," he insisted. "In the first place, their most desperate need, as they see it right now, is probably an efficient but simple weapon of some sort, capable of being enlarged into a heavy defensive piece of great range. I understand our blast-rifle is such a weapon. I believe they live in absolute terror of another attack, and they apparently have little or no technology left with which to prepare for such an attack. Hence their going underground."

He paused to let the point sink in. "And in the second place, it seems reasonable to believe they would understand our good intentions from such a gift. Surely they will see that no one planning an aggressive move is going to arm his intended victims first! Their behavior certainly indicates that they are accustomed to direct action, rather than to Machiavellian subtleties of plot and counter-plot."

Nestor stuck out a skeptical lower lip. "How will they know we're making a gesture that means anything? I mean, they still might figure the gun is just a little toy in our league, and that we're not running any risk at all by giving it to them."

Stuart hesitated before replying. He nodded in appreciation of intelligent analysis. "That's a difficult point which will have to be worked out later . . . possibly on the spot. First of all, we shall have to establish contact. It will also be necessary to show them we have a defensive screen, too—which they would doubtless be overjoyed to have—and that we are willing to turn it off and trust them. It will be a delicate and intriguing problem in psycho-logic."

Rogers shook his head and laughed a little. "It sounds as cockeyed as 'Uncle Willie' Ulo's stories about Sirius V. But, so help me, I believe it'd work!" All at once his expression changed, and he looked hard at the expert. "One thing, though, mister. I know I wouldn't care for the job! Who's going to be the guinea-pig and go down for the first little chat with them?"

Stuart smiled thinly. "Who will bell the cat, eh? Another fair question. Well, I shall set up the apparatus, and of course I intend to try out its effect, too. I shall confront the natives myself after they have received our picture message and the gun."

The others protested, but there was a stubborn set to his jaw. "After all," he explained later to Gordon, "while you fellows have been acquiring glamor, so to speak, I've been leading a rather dull life. I intend to have at least one little fling at dangerous living. Besides, I'm the only really expendable man in the crew . . . the rest of you are necessary to the operation of the *Special Agent*. And anyway, I'm only here because I know something about communicating ideas. This is part of my job, if anything is."

The rest of the day and a major part of the night, except for brief catnaps, were spent in fabricating the device which Gordon designed to Stuart's specifications. Even White's work on the mosaic alarm

was suspended. The linguist planned, sketched, and worked with his photographs for ten hours before allowing himself to rest. He had done all he could with his part of the project, and decided to lend a hand in the shop . . . but first he would massage the leg which had been so painfully gouged when the meteor struck. He sat down to ease the ache, and promptly fell asleep.

WHEN they woke him three hours later, his machine was ready. In his meticulous way, he had made careful notes of the picture sequence, and other five members of Contact, Incorporated had arranged everything as indicated. He examined the device sleepily, rubbing the back of his neck and yawning. "Looks okay," he grunted. "Controls tested? Good. Nice job, very nice." Still blinking, he helped carry the makeshift metal-and-plastic assembly into the scout ship in Number Three Lock.

Brettner climbed in and sat down next to him at the controls. "Sort of a lucky thing for us this old planet has four moons," grinned the scout. "All four were in the sky until a few minutes ago. Too much light for us to pussyfoot around on the surface, so you and I had a chance for a nap. Now there's only two . . . just enough for us to work by. We'll have to hustle though."

A few minutes later, under Brettner's skillful handling, the little ship settled to a quick, silent landing about two kilometers from the cave. The scout got out and began unloading the apparatus. Stuart, now fully alert, held a low-voiced radio conversation with Gordon. "Still no sign of any activity?"

The captain's voice was blurred with fatigue. "No, nothing, except some infrared indications of large animals to the south. We'll keep you informed. For Pete's sake, be careful."

The linguist, nervous as he was, chuckled. "Good of you to remind us." He put on his bone-conduction earpiece, throat-mike, and all the other gear designed for planets with breathable atmospheres. Clambering out of the little vessel, he joined Brettner. The two men

helped each other with the slings of their backpacks, locked up the ship, and started off.

Stuart had to run occasionally to keep up with the other's easy, practised stride. The extra rifle and his half of the apparatus jounced and dug into his back. Occasionally he heard Brettner whisper into his mike, asking for directions. The compass was useless near the iron-bearing coral rocks.

Like the scout, Stuart had studied the route in advance, but traversing it in the dark was a grimly different matter. The double shadows of the two moons were confusing and made him stumble. Once a sensitive bush of some kind shuddered and drew back with a moan when he grasped it for support. He shuddered and brushed sweat off his face and sleeve. What did anyone know, after all, about the number of dangerous organisms this planet harbored? Carnivorous plants, for instance, or even animals, might not have sense enough to avoid iron complexes such as human blood

Something soft beneath his foot shrieked horribly in the night and slid away. He went down on one knee, but waved when Brettner turned as if to help him up. "I'm letting this get me," he thought angrily. He got up and jogged along again, trying to imitate the scout's powerful stride.

Abruptly they came upon the trail. They had just started along it when a warning came from the *Special Agent*. "One of those animals on the prairie must have picked up your scent. Probably a hell-cat Sloping off toward the trail now. Ye gods! . . . he must be doing sixty kilometers! Now he's slowing . . . you should see him about a hundred meters ahead in a few seconds. He's sneaking onto the trail."

The linguist's heart thudded as he crouched in shadow with the scout. "What do we do, Brettner?" he whispered.

"Have to use this," the other replied, hauling out a wide-barrelled, clumsy looking Texas Slugger. "Picked up this sweetheart on Callisto, but I only got three shells." He aimed down the path through an offset sight. "Don't get behind this, laddie."

IN THE moonlight farther up the trail, a sinuous beast like a huge armored cat glided out from the brush. It opened jaws a meter wide, showing double rows of dull green phosphorescent teeth, and began to lope toward the men. The scout fired when it was less than sixty meters away, and a rocket-propelled projectile hissed out toward it. A few meters out, the 2000-G drive of the projectile cut in, and the missile crashed into the hell-cat with terrible impact.

The creature was a hollow mass of pulp almost instantaneously. The only sounds had been the brief hiss of the rocket, the even shorter crackling of the accelerated drive, and an earth-shuddering crunch when the device had struck a wall of rock beyond the beast. Apparently these had not alarmed the other nocturnal creatures about, for the various animal cries went on as before.

"Come on," said the scout, resuming the trail. "We got to hurry." Stuart followed, wrinkling his nose at the horrible stench of the dead animal. Nearby, a brightly glowing hole in the rock showed where the missile had buried itself and disintegrated.

By the time the men reached their objective, a little trailside clearing just out of sight from the cave, the language expert was thoroughly winded. It was some satisfaction to him to note that the scout was sweating heavily too. Brettner unshouldered his equipment, took a sip of water from his canteen, and moved up the path a few meters to keep watch on the cave. The opening glowed less brightly than the luminescent rock around it.

Stuart worked as rapidly as he could in the moonlight and ghostly shine of the hill. His footing was uncertain on the irregular coral. Twice he stopped and crouched, rifle ready, as his sensitive ears detected a change in the pattern of night sounds. A wild assortment of odors drifted with the faint breeze; once a friendly little creature smelling like fragrant Scotch offered him a pebble and giggled. In his anxious haste, the linguist dropped two bolts into the twisted crevices of the rock, and he began to feel he was having a nightmare.

When the assembly was nearly completed, Nestor warned over the radio, "Better step on it, guys. We can see daylight coming from up here. You have about half an hour to get away." By the time the device was operating satisfactorily, there was enough light to see clearly. The two men on the ground picked up the tools and canteens hastily and hurried back along the trail.

They had gone about halfway when a stone the size of a baseball landed with a vicious clank on the scout's headgear. He swore softly and sagged against a bush, fighting dizzily to stay on his feet. Stuart snatched up a smaller rock and hurled it at the attacking stone-hawk, which was banking into another dive in the dim morning light. The stone smashed one wing. The creature spun and flopped through the air, screaming and gobbling, until it crashed into a tree and fell dead.

Brettner shook his head and grinned ruefully. "Good thing I got a wooden head . . . Yeah, I'm okay." He examined the dent in his helmet, and spit contemptuously at the dead hawk. "That's some arm you've got, mister," he added respectfully.

Stuart examined his arm, pleased. "Used to pitch on the varsity," he explained. "Did you hear the mouthings of that vicious bird? He was swearing at us, I'm sure!" He resumed the march, wondering absently whether all these Azuran creatures spoke basically the same language. From what little he had been able to observe, it seemed likely.

IT WAS almost full daylight when they reached their scout ship. "Come on up," Nestor told them. "No sign of activity around the cave yet, but you better keep between it and the sun just in case somebody peeks." Brettner took off immediately.

Ten minutes later Stuart was seated at his apparatus, stuffing breakfast food into his mouth and feeling very tired. "Been making this stuff for a hundred and fifty years," he grumbled to himself, chewing doggedly, "and it's still lousy." Suddenly he dropped his spoon and adjusted the view-screen controls. Gordon walked in,

buttoning up his dungarees and yawning. "Brother," said the chief, "when we get back we're going to sleep for two weeks!" He looked at the busy linguist and was immediately wide awake. "What's up?"

Stuart pointed to the screen. "Native just peeked out." He reached over toward one of the cephaloids, mindless brains with tremendous memory and associative power, and began flipping switches. Activating solution flowed through the micro-cellular colloid; little lights on a panel winked on as the surface potentials reached operating level.

The linguist glanced briefly at the screen. "I guess there's time to show you one of its little tricks, just to warm it up," he said. He sang, in Universal Speech, a couple of ribald verses of "The Venus of Venus," then touched a switch. Immediately the song came back at him through a little speaker, but in English—and with the unmistakable drawl of Rogers. "I conditioned it a few minutes ago with his voice," explained Stuart. He was delighted with Gordon's reaction of incredulous astonishment. "It's really a wonderful mechanism, Gordon. It—oops! There's a native!"

He jabbed hastily at the "Primary Condition" stud, erasing the song and the accent, and switched on the remote control for the picture sequence. He handed Gordon a headset. "Will you monitor the pickup, please? The rest of this stuff will keep me busy." He fell silent, watching the screen.

Gordon reached over and switched on the movie camera set up beside him to record the scene.

V

THREE SCARLET NATIVES HAD come out of the cave. They stood in a patch of brilliant sunlight, swinging their middle limbs about and playing with a sassy little monkey-rat as men would with a fox terrier. At length they picked up what seemed to be a crossbow and several spears, slung bundles across their sloping shoulders, and started down the trail. They walked slowly, spears at the ready, and were obviously alert. Frequent-

ly they glanced up, or paused as if listening.

Rounding a turn, the lead native stopped abruptly, leaped back and dropped flat. The other two dropped almost simultaneously. The leader motioned cautiously for his companions to crawl forward; he pointed with a tentacular upper limb toward the picture sequence machine gleaming in the morning light. On it was showing a picture of a native, enlarged from Stuart's picture of his temporary "prisoner".

The semanticist had evidently made a good guess in alien psychology, for no hostile move was made toward the machine. The natives lay there studying it, making occasional guarded gestures to each other. They stiffened as the next picture flipped into view. It was a Terrestrial family with two children. It was the picture Stuart kept beside his bunk, and was the best thing he could think of to put across the concept of a peaceful people.

Still no hostile move. No sounds, either, except the background chirping and jabbering of other animals.

Anxiously, Stuart fussed with his controls. He flipped to the next picture and a dozen after that without getting an audible response. The natives were shown views of Terrestrial life, New York and the space-port, the *Special Agent*, and two views of the receding Earth.

Then the linguist tried one of his sketches. It showed a globular ship, such as the Invaders were believed to have used, attacking the Terrestrial ship. In the following sketches, the Earth ship was damaged, but managed to destroy the other.

One of the natives was evidently jolted into comment at this point. "Aru!" came distinctly over the loudspeaker. Stuart immediately murmured "Picture Fifteen" in Universal Speech into his microphone. He beamed at Gordon, relaxed a little, and hit the sequence button again.

The next set of pictures showed the approach to Azura, the landing, and Rogers' kindly treatment of the monkey-rats. Again a comment came from the middle native, evidently younger and less well-trained. This time he uttered several

syllables, which the cephaloid duly absorbed. The rear native thwacked him across the back angrily. Stuart bounced in his seat with silent glee. He made microscopic adjustments to the analyzer and continued the show.

Behind him, the door opened quietly. Rogers came in with some breakfast for Gordon. The scout raised his eyebrows inquiringly; the chief winked and nodded at the screen, holding up a hand in the "okay" gesture. Stuart looked around at them, his finger hesitating over the sequence button. He shut off his mike for a moment. "This is one of the parts I'm dubious about. We swing into our sales talk here. Man sees native, puts down gun, and approaches peacefully. Then they exchange gifts."

He pushed the stud thoughtfully. "If the response to this is favorable, do you think we ought to go ahead with the rest?"

The chief frowned. "Sure. Why not?"

"Well . . . I suppose it would be foolish to stop now. I don't have enough material yet to prepare a verbal message, and they seem to be understanding this one anyway. On the other hand . . . they might not like this. It shows us helping them to rebuild a city, and giving them weapons." He lit a cigarette and hit the button again. "They might wonder what we want in return."

Gordon put down his coffee and scratched his chin. "Well, I don't think we ought to revise our plans now, Stuart. I think they'd be glad to offer us a base, in return for protection. We might as well go ahead."

THE linguist nodded. The minutes passed as he continued the series of pictures. After a while he opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by a gabble of sounds from the pickup unit. The natives were pointing upward and discussing something. Pilot lights on the cephaloid hookup showed that the material was being received, passed back and forth for analysis, and stored away. Stuart threw in a key word now and then to identify the picture being shown.

"It's clear that they understand," he whispered. "Now for the clincher. We

help them fight off the Invaders. I hope they don't get the idea that our presence would make another Invader attack more likely."

He continued to push the stud every twenty or thirty seconds, lips moving as he counted. When the counter showed the end of the sequence approaching, he nodded in satisfaction. The natives were still talking to each other. "Good thing we've got these cephaloids," Stuart whispered. "An electronic analyzer could never sort out the three voices. Nor could any linguist alive, for that matter."

Once again he paused, finger hovering. "This is where we show them pictures of a blast rifle, how to use it, and so on—and then the magic box opens and we give them one." His whisper was faint, and he swallowed. "Should I go ahead?" He seemed to be asking himself.

Gordon studied him a few seconds. "Play it your own way, Stuart. The risk is yours, so the decision ought to be."

The linguist put out his cigarette with trembling fingers. "Yes . . . I realize that I talked you into letting me go ahead with my own plan. But . . . you see . . . well, I've never done anything especially brave or dangerous, as all you fellows have. The plan *might* be made to work out without my actually going down there in person. I've been wondering what you would say if I . . . backed out."

The chief got up and clapped him on the back, awkwardly. "Why, not a thing, Stuart. Wouldn't say a word. A man's personal project is his own, in this kind of business. Long as it doesn't affect the welfare of anyone else, he can volunteer for, or refuse, any job."

Stuart smiled slowly and sat up straight. "Then I'll go ahead. I just wanted to be sure I could have backed out if I'd wanted to. If I do something worthwhile, I want it to be without compulsion." He punched the sequence button vigorously, while the chief stared at him with amused respect. He grinned back at Gordon. "Sit down, Captain, and keep an eye on the natives."

Gordon sat, applying his attention to the scene on the ground. "Think they'll get this part?"

"They certainly ought to. I even made

a sketch of a native destroying a hell-cat with my new gun." After a few minutes of attentive study by the three natives, the series was finished. The language expert reached over and depressed a different stud without hesitation. "There it is. A nice little blast rifle, practically new!"

The screen showed the front of a box falling open under the sequence machine. The three Azurans raised their heads and stared. Then they looked up at the sky, and back at the box. Their conversation was excited, not at all hushed.

Finally the leader sent the third native around in a flanking move, equipped with the crossbow. When the new position had been taken up, the three studied the situation and seemed to discuss its various aspects. Suddenly, while the flanker held a bead on the machine, the one who had been in the lead stood up and advanced warily toward the proffered gun. He studied it at close range, after looking over the scene carefully.

Abruptly he laid down his spear and seized the blast rifle. He remained crouching, obviously waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, he straightened up and began to examine the weapon. He turned to the last picture, still showing on the machine, and carefully conformed his tentacles around the gunstock as indicated. Then he looked about, as if seeking a target.

A large, brilliant blue tree about twenty meters away seemed to be his choice. He spent a moment getting the sights lined up and then pulled the trigger.

THE entire lower half of the tree disappeared in a tremendous explosion of steam and splinters. The upper part of it came smashing down, as did great sections of others directly behind the target.

The stunned native staggered to his feet, still clutching the gun, and cooed at it lovingly. His two companions came running up, whistling and gabbling with excitement. They were allowed to take the gun up on the hill and try it out—at more distant targets. Several trees and a good-sized rock disappeared with a noisy violence that was obviously satisfactory.

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The leader remained with the picture machine and began to examine it. He jumped, startled, when Stuart flipped one more sketch into view. It showed the little scout ship about to land. After the native had studied it a while, Stuart gave him the last one. This was a sketch of the linguist himself, stepping out of the scout ship and greeting a waiting Azuran.

The reaction to this was immediate and positive. Shrill commands sent the smaller native into ambush in the shrubbery; the other came running down the hill, handed over the gun, and fled to the cave. The leader, still watching the sky, squatted down to wait, rifle beside him. After a moment he took something out of his knapsack and apparently began to munch on it. Twice he snatched up the gun and sighted through it, as though practising.

Stuart frowned at the screen. "They seem to understand I'm about to visit them, but they're not convinced they can trust visitors. No reason why they should be, I suppose." He disconnected the pickup unit from the cephaloid circuit.

Gordon cocked his head to one side reflectively. "Well, I don't think the situation is too bad. You've seen how cautious they are . . . they must have been very badly scared when their cities were destroyed. Perfectly natural. It's also evident they're not fundamentally warlike; their behavior shows an absence of military background. Even a couple of traders noticed that, by the way, over on the other side of the planet last year."

The linguist shook his head reprovingly. "Let's avoid semantic confusions when we can, Gordon. Their behavior does not fit in with *your* notion of military background. We have no right to say what it connotes *in their culture*."

The captain acknowledged the reasonableness of this statement with a smile and left him to the solitude he needed. He began the task of receiving the material the cephaloids had assimilated, feeding in associations of "probable general context" with the natives' comments regarding each picture. He laughed to himself as he realized that a certain amount of projection of his own notions was inevitable.

Such was the tremendous power of the

cephaloids, and the delicate, almost intuitive skill of his handling, that the major part of the analysis was complete in little more than an hour. He switched the controls to "Translate, Univ. Sp. to Other." Indicator needles shifted and steadied as the surface potentials readjusted in the semi-living colloids.

Then, before proceeding further, he asked the captain to join him again. When Gordon was seated, the expert smiled wryly at him. "This is usually considered very poor procedure, but there's only one word I can be fairly sure of as a check on this thing. It seems reasonable that, when the middle native exclaimed 'Aru!', he meant 'Good'!! That was when we destroyed the attacking ship, if you remember . . . a little fiction which I shall have to explain to them later." Into the microphone he said, in Universal Speech, "Good. That is good."

"Aru. Aru naa lo," replied the loudspeaker.

Stuart, though he relaxed a little then, lost no time. It took him only a few minutes to memorize several phrases which the jelly-and-silver translator gave him. By the time Brettner had the little scout ship warmed up for him, Stuart was prepared to tell the natives, "Peace! I come in peace. Your people and my people have the same enemy. Therefore let us be friends and work together. We shall give you large and strong weapons."

He turned to leave the lab, but stopped to squint once more at the screen. Only the native with the gun was visible, still grimly waiting. The linguist finished buckling on his gear with nervous fingers. "They look awfully well-disciplined to me," he murmured to himself. "Wish I felt a little more nonchalant about this!" He clumped down the passageway to Number Three Lock, where he met Brettner climbing out of the scout ship.

Brettner slapped him on the back, saying, "She's all wound up. Good luck, chum. Keep away from the girlyies, hear?" From the control room, Rogers shouted gaily, "Send us a postcard, laddie. One of them Venus-type!" The two scouts guffawed heartily. Gordon looked out and waved at him.

The linguist climbed into the control seat, laughing in spite of himself. He waved at Brettner, shut the inner door, and opened the outer. A monitor light showed green. "Ready," he told the intercom. He was surprised at how steady his voice and hands were.

"Cast off!" came Gordon's voice.

VI

HE TOUCHED THE "RELEASE" button and felt himself flung away from the *Special Agent*. He boosted his little vessel around a semicircle several kilometers in diameter, as he had been instructed, so the position of the big ship would not be given away when he approached the ground. He overmodulated the drive then, to make plenty of noise, and headed directly for the waiting native. Over a suitable grassy spot, he waited until he was sure the Azuran had seen him; then he eased down slowly, careful not to make any sudden moves.

He landed with the nose about ten degrees too low, settled with a rolling bump, and opened the port as soon as he could manage. He mumbled to himself a bit, practising his little speech. Then he stepped out.

The blast rifle looked like a ninety-millimeter projector. It scowled viciously at his abdomen from only twenty paces away. He swallowed several times and managed a trembly little smile.

The native continued to inspect him sourly through the peepsight. A tentacle seemed to twitch impatiently at the trigger.

"After all," the linguist thought rapidly, "a facial expression such as a smile is probably meaningless to him. I shall have to make a more significant sign, as in that sketch." He unbuckled his holster belt and carefully laid it to one side, handguns and all. Still no response.

He walked forward halfway to the native, holding up his open hands. He recited his speech, then, and stood waiting.

With his first words, the other's attitude changed. The gun was lowered slowly while the native stared at him with big,

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black, disk-like eyes. He stared back, examining the bright red native with interest. Long feet, with two toes like pincers; heavily muscled legs; middle limbs like arms, with short, powerful hands of a sort; two six-fingered tentacles growing out from the sides of the head—

One of the middle limbs reached out and tugged at his arm experimentally. The native said something evidently meaning "Come along". Stuart walked along with him, reporting "Okay, so far," into his radio. The two beings walked up to the entrance to the cave, from where the scout ship could just be seen. Suddenly the smaller native sprang out of the brush and backed the linguist against a tree, holding the cross-bow almost at his throat. The first native whirled, aimed the blast-rifle at the scout ship, and fired. There was a flash at the ship's bow, and a deep gash was blasted into the metal.

"Aru!" said the natives.

Stuart's earphone crackled, but the signal was weak. "What's going on?" came Gordon's voice, faintly. "Get away from them and we'll blow them to smithereens!"

He tried to think clearly. "I don't know how to get away," he realized miserably. "Never had any of that combat training." He found the native with the blast rifle chattering at him; the other had withdrawn the crossbow from his throat. "I'm all right," he reported weakly. He listened to the native a moment, then added, "This is rather puzzling, though. They actually seem friendly. I believe one of them is telling me that we're friends now."

"That lousy iron hill you're on is killing your signal, Stuart. I can hardly hear you. You're in plain sight, though, through the telescope. Shall we come after you?"

The natives were pulling at the linguist's arm, urging him toward the cave. "No, keep out of sight a while," he shouted, shaking his head. "I believe they want me to come with them."

THE reply from the *Special Agent* was unintelligible. Stuart allowed the Azurans to guide him into the cave; he was not surprised to find it the end of a long tunnel through the coral. Two other

natives came running past and took up positions as guards just inside the entrance.

The phosphorescent material of the hill itself supplied a feeble light. There seemed to be an alarm system of some sort, for handles were set into small square boxes on the walls every fifty meters or so.

During the hour-long walk, Stuart learned bits of the natives' language. If one could apply the hitherto universally valid criteria of the Linguistic Academy, he decided, this language represented a long history of high culture and philosophical achievement. He found the idea encouraging.

He was already constructing simple sentences when the tunnel turned sharply and entered a small cave. It was really an underground room, he noticed, with several corridors leading away. One of his guides pulled a lever; a moment later a dozen other natives entered the room. With them was a monkey-rat, sporting Rogers' two hunting knives; it pointed to the linguist and chattered shrilly. The linguist recognized one of the Azurans as the one he had caught. The first to enter, however, seemed considerably older than the rest. Stuart guessed he was a high official.

The elderly one approached the Earthman and held out his tentacles to the sides. It seemed to mean something. There was a short, tense silence.

"Of course!" exclaimed Stuart to himself. "The gesture of peaceful intent: showing the absence of weapons!" He held up his hands, likewise empty, and repeated his speech.

There were murmurs of "Aru!" around him. Unobtrusive weapons were unobtrusively lowered. Sketching materials were brought to the official: sheets of something like parchment, and a reed which exuded an inky substance through a fine hole. Two blocks of what seemed to be extraordinarily soft wood were carried in; the official sat down, somewhat in human fashion, and motioned the language expert to do likewise.

The "conversation" lasted almost two hours. Stuart, by sketching and using a few words, explained his mission. The

natives seemed to understand; judging by their awareness of the outer universe, they had considerable scientific knowledge. He guessed, though, that their technology was more biological than mechanical. They knew where the Invaders were from, what they had looked like, and how some of their mechanisms had operated. But Azuran culture, never warlike, had been unable to strike back, and had been so badly smashed that there had been no opportunity to use the captured knowledge.

"They nearly destroyed my people," explained the official with words and pictures. "We were many millions. Now only thousands. We saved what we could and hid underground, scattered. For five years we have struggled to stay alive. Now we are regaining our strength and can think of building again. But always we must be ready for the Invaders. They killed for nothing or for amusement. Took nothing except specimens; apparently they wanted nothing here but sport. They simply attacked without warning one day, all over the planet, and hunted us for fifty-four days. Then they disappeared. We caught a few live ones outside their ships by trickery, and we captured two small ships the same way. But in our difficulty we have had little time to investigate the ships."

"Where are the captured creatures?" asked Stuart.

"Oh, they did not live long." The other's manner did not indicate regret. "They needed high temperature and a special atmosphere to stay alive, and of course we had inadequate means to care for them. We made very thorough biological studies of them, however." He shook his tentacles, as if in disgust. "They were remarkably unpleasant. Colorless, and gritty to the touch. Completely hateful. They used to throw dissected specimens of our people out of their ships; sometimes live people were dropped."

HE NODDED toward the blast-rifle. "You are good to offer weapons. From certain records we found, we believe the enemy will return soon. I understand your need for a base here. I can speak

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for my people . . . what is left of them. We accept your offer. Come down again tomorrow to the clearing in your big ship. Our highest leader will be present, and a treaty will be made."

Abruptly, thus, the interview was over. The old native was obviously tired. The linguist got to his feet, intending to express his pleasure at the outcome. He had his mouth open, and it stayed that way when the blast rifle was suddenly thrust into his hands. The official, who had handed it to him, put a tentacle on his shoulder in what Stuart recognized as a gesture of friendship.

The linguist grinned, put his hand on the other's shoulder, and handed back the weapon.

There was a great din of whistling and cries of "Aru! Aru naa lo!" It became a sort of cheer, with a crowd of natives following Stuart and his three guides back down the tunnel. The old official stood and watched them go.

Back in the daylight, the linguist was startled to discover that Procyon was low in the sky and that night was near. He hurried down the path toward his scout ship to get away from the iron hill. Hastily he switched on his radio. Before he could catch his breath enough to talk, he heard White's voice.

"Hey, I see him! There he is, chief; there's the little guy!" Sounds of the drive being activated came through the earphone.

Gordon's voice cut in. "You okay, Stuart?"

"Yes, yes, I'm all right. Come on down—peaceably."

"What's the deal?"

"They're convinced. They'll have their president, or whatever, here in the morning to sign a treaty with us."

"WHAT?"

A moment later the big ship landed with a silent rush, flattening out a large expanse of scrub. The ground crunched under it. A dozen wide-eyed natives watched from a respectful distance.

The lower port flew open; Gordon and Rogers came scrambling down the ladder. The two men came running over, hand-

guns swinging heavily at their sides. The turret guns were trained on the hill before the cave.

"Is this on the level?" demanded Gordon.

"Yes. I'll explain later, after I've had some sleep."

The captain's eye fell on the scout ship. "Looks like your ship will navigate all right," he said, still out of breath. "Probably have to replace the autopilot and tracker, though. But why in blazes did they take a shot at it? And why wasn't your defensive field on?"

The linguist kicked a pebble. "I forgot to ask them why they did that. I guess they figured my gesture of offering a weapon didn't mean much unless I was vulnerable to the weapon myself. Or maybe they felt that, if I came in good faith, I'd come without protection. Anyway, they didn't want to shoot me just to find out, so they tested it on the ship and decided I was—er, on the level. If it *had* been on, they'd probably have shot me immediately with the crossbow. Or maybe they'd have figured out what the glow was and shot me without testing it. Then they'd have gone back in the tunnel and sealed it up for good."

He suddenly laughed aloud, face alight with pleasure and surprised realization. "For the first time on this trip, I'm glad I've never had any military experience! If I'd been well-trained, that field would have been turned on!"

Gordon's strained face relaxed. He looked at Stuart in awe, and put an arm around his shoulders. After a moment he said, musingly, "What do we do next? We've got to get back, but we also ought to see this through when the brass gets here."

Stuart's reply was prompt. "You go back. Leave me food for a couple of days and tell Patrol to bring me what I need for a long stay. I'll see this thing through."

"Can I take a picture of you tomorrow with the Azuran big chief? It'd look swell in the papers back home." Gordon's tone was bantering.

The linguist looked him in the eye. "I wish you would," he said, soberly.

(Continued from page 2)

is now the only science fiction magazine on the market which sells for less than a quarter; and it already has the fewest departments of any of them. It isn't quite as big—as far as number of pages are concerned—as some of its competitors, but it already offers as much story content as any of them, and costs a nickel less.

Dropping La Vizi, therefore, would automatically make PLANET the biggest money's worth in the field—more stories for less cash outlay on the reader's part, with very little additional expense to your firm. I think the result would be a marked rise in circulation.

When you add the fact that most of the letters in La Vizi are insane, the question seems to have an easy answer. Your correspondent is right; let's drop the Vizigraph.

Regards,

JAMES BLISH

Route 1, Box 545
Los Altos, California

DEAR MR. PAYNE:

... May I add my two cents worth in re the Vizi? It does reduce total story wordage, it's true, but from the writer's standpoint at least, the reader comments are well worth the type and paper they consume. At least they keep us from getting the idea we're Hemingways!

Sincerely,

ALFRED J. COPPEL, JR.

4238 Nelson Street,
Chicago 41, Ill.

DEAR PAYNE:

As an old reader of PLANET—since Vol. I, No. 1, in fact, and I still have them all—I vote to retain the Vizigraph. They might be cut drastically, but after all most of the flamboyance and affectation is due to your own policy of awarding originals, so what the hell?

I also vote to keep PLANET just as it is; in my opinion you are doing a very fine job. There will always be a place, I believe, for good space opera.

Sincerely yours,

EDWARD E. SMITH, PH.D.

(Okay, Doc, how about something from you?—Ed.)

3012 Halldale Ave.,
Los Angeles 7, Cal.

DEAR PAUL:

Ordinarily I can read the Vizigraph and come away without any great urge to rush to the defense of this and that. The Viz. seems about equally divided between the insipid little blatherings and the more serious stuff, such as the racial debate waged currently in your columns. I've no intention of entering into the latter; it's doing all right for itself.

I do want to take issue with one paragraph in the letter by R. F. Nelson. He points out a similarity in Walton's *In His Image* to Dwiggin's *Millennium I*. Fact is, I happened to read *Millennium I* some months ago; and while this work

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LOIS L. REEDER

Box 549 Palestine, Texas

PLEASE mention FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE GROUP when answering advertisements

may have inspired Walton to do his robot yarn, I'm convinced that's as far as it goes.

So what? By the same token, may not *Love Among the Robots* (McDowell, Winter '46—Ed.) have been inspired by *Millennium I*? And, reading *Moon of Madness* in the current issue, I was struck by a sort of similarity, up to a point, to Wells' *First Men in the Moon*. And there's no doubt that the excellent *Seven Jewels of Chamar*, a couple of years ago, was derived from the legends surrounding the famous seven jewels of the Medici family—presented by Pope Clement to Catherine de Medici upon her marriage, and which thereafter had a most remarkable history. I repeat, so what? Raymond Jones did a fine science-fiction story from it.

Getting back to *Millennium I*, unique and powerful though it is, that story has been done before. In atmosphere and mood it reminded me a great deal of *Tumithak of the Corridors* which appeared in a STF magazine back in 1932. I wonder how many of your readers remember that one? And I can recall more than a few others with similar theme.

Point is, after all, where do writers get most of their basic ideas? *Pin them down* and they'll admit to adopting previous ideas and themes but with a new approach, new handling, new angles. Actual "lifting" is a pretty rare thing. If Mr. Nelson thinks he has some ideas that haven't been done before in some manner or form, my advice to him is to hurry up and write them—he'll find a ready market; or better still, get in touch with me!

Sincerely,

HENRY HASSE

1618 McFarland Ave.,
Gastonia, North Carolina

DEAR PAUL:

I see in the daily press that one of science fiction's greatest prophecies will soon, like the atom bomb, be a reality. The headline says, "Report U. S. Racing To Build 'Defensive Moon'." The story says, in part, "The United States . . . is now studying the possibility of creating a military outpost hanging like a tiny 'moon' far up in the skies." (The story is credited to the A.P.) It goes on to explain that, the "earth satellite vehicle program" was tucked away cryptically in an annual report by former Secretary of Defense Forrestal.

The "moon", according to the story, would be established about nine-tenths of the distance of the natural moon, beyond the earth's gravity pull. The satellite would be a sort of platform from which to launch or guide rocket attacks on any part of the world.

Scientists also were reported studying the possibility of using the 'platform to concentrate destructive rays of the sun upon an enemy target. A man-made satellite hanging near the moon would not need to be manned at first, but merely equipped with automatic instruments.

Now, there, friend Paul, is a good subject for discussing in *La Vizi*. Since I know nothing of such matters, I won't attempt to air my personal views—other than it sounds like a good idea. But the more informed among your readers should have many pages to say on the subject. And possibly some of the authors could construct

a lead novel on the subject. (Young officer detailed to build station. Encounters trouble with rival nation and is marooned on moon. Girl friend suspected of being spy . . . what he has constructed is blasted from space . . . given certain time to reconstruct project or will lose commission . . . is on satellite with enemy agent who has planted an atomic bomb that will destroy station . . . plenty of suspense while hero dodges around . . . Hasse could do it, or Wells. Or even Bracket or Conner.) (Who said that?)

Sincerely,

WILKIE CONNER

(Okay, try it—Ed.)

WE ARE FOREIGN DEVILS

Box 191,
Lockney, Tex.

DEAR EDITOR:

This job really belongs to Chad Oliver, who wins six pictures in the time it takes me to win one. But Chad is probably busy coaxing a college degree from his reluctant tutors and might not recognize the importance of a letter such as has found its way into our latest *Vizigraph*.

Brushing aside all likes and dislikes, the paramount issue is one of circulation. If eliminating the *Vizigraph* will sell more copies (and by "more" I mean any number consistently greater than one), then, as Editor of *PLANET STORIES*, your duty to the Publisher is to drop it immediately—even though the Olivers and the Siglers and the Bradleys cancel their subscriptions and vow never to again look upon those bewitching blondes and redheads whose luxuriant curves protest the straightness of the covers on which they must be painted.

To some extent I agree with Mr. Hall of Great Village. I care not a whit about Chad's opinion on the merits or demerits of a story I've read and judged before I saw his letter—even though I know that the authors who wrote the stories are keenly interested in such an analysis and will not knowingly submit an inferior story to a magazine that publishes such letters of criticism. If we drop the *Vizigraph* we drop the reins that made *PLANET STORIES* the best in its field, and we eventually lower the quality of its stories to a point where Mr. Hall will no longer buy them.

More serious is the charge against we whose names appear so frequently in the *Vizigraph* that Mr. Hall is justified in assuming that we think it our personal property; that we are attempting to force our small opinions upon a public whose gullibility is less than we imagined. The *Vizigraph* is an intrinsic and essential part of *PLANET STORIES* but we letter-hacks were never an intrinsic part of the *Vizigraph*. We are the foreign devils, the Invaders whom Mr. Hall would have thrown out by the ear in order to make a place for something more agreeable and far less irksome.

Once again I find myself in partial agreement with Mr. Hall of Great Village. We have played false to the magazine we wished to see grow, and we have played false to the public by making the *Vizigraph* a battleground for our personal opinions. That we thought to enliven its pages and make it an interesting feature for reader and author alike does not excuse us for

making it a parade of vulgarities. We have a house to clean—and we have no broom with which to clean it. . . .

Sincerely yours,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY

ROD HAILS POLL

226 W. 60th Street,
Chicago 21, Illinois

DEAR EDITOR:

This thing you've started regarding the Vizigraph is bound to bring to light a fact a lot of fans may have suspected already. You'll find fifty per cent of newsstand circulation is held up by consistent readers, and the other buyers think they're getting a horror story magazine. Human nature being what it is, and science fiction being what it is, you either like this type of reading or you don't. You're either imaginative and progressive or you're not. Which is to say nothing at all against so-called unimaginative people. Half the time it just ain't their fault, I'm spoin. No matter what happens—print the results. It's a poll telling upon fandom's most vital interests.

Now let me say something about Miss (still Miss?) Leigh Brackett and her latest Mars yarn, *Queen of the Martian Catacombs*. It's in the style of Burroughs, but it seems to me it's much better than Burroughs (though there's unquestionable magic in Burroughs' work). I love this type of story. I had fun reading it, I don't care what anybody says about it, I don't care who calls it hack, tripe or juvenile. I liked it. I liked *Beast Jewel of Mars* even better. Please don't stop. More, more and more of Brackett and Mars adventure.

There was an adequate lineup of other stories this time, but nothing worth raving about and nothing worth a serious kick. Editorially speaking, a decent enough issue. And I'm glad to see the ludicrous race-issue fading out of the back-stage. Goodbye forever.

This business about polling, however, suggests a possibility that somehow never occurred to me before in exactly this way. Why not carry it a step further? Get down to serious business about story likes and dislikes regarding PLANET. Who likes heavy science and math—who adventure? How about sex in science fiction? How do male and female writers stack up against each other? . . .

AND LET'S HAVE SOME MACHINES ON THOSE COVERS!

Sincerely,

RODNEY PALMER

EXPOSES EDITOR'S HAT

157 N. Euclid Ave.,
Oak Park, Ill.

DEAR EDITOR:

"Well, men, it took a long time to do it but we did it. We must have written dozens of letters under various names, but it was worth it. This day will go down in the annals of old LRPC as NV-Day. That's 'No Vizigraph'. Yep. We can finally relax. No more will we have to put the letters in a hat to pick those for publication.

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You guys had it soft, though. I had to read one or two and insert some comment in italics. And no more will we have to put the writers' names in a hat to find the winners. Will you ever forget the time that Six-and-five-eights Stetson got to choose one? Well, it's time to make up the next issue. Joe, break open the file of stinkers (the 'Swell' ones jamming our files) we bought during the war. Pete, get that book I use for editing. You know. The one entitled 'How to Insert Trite and Hack-nayed Phrases in Fiction' by Brackett. Gung Ho."

"But, T. T., I can't understand it. We had such a good circulation in Forty Eight. Now we're lower than the 'Sigler-For-President Gazette'. Wait a minute. I know the answer. Fire all our artists and get Finlay."

"No, Ed, I'm afraid even Virg wouldn't help if La Vizi was taken for a ride. You took the necessary step by eliminating the Siglerish letters. While we're on the subject of the Vizigraph you might give pics to Ramsay, Curtis and Campbell..."

Only three stories had something to recommend them this time and they appeared at the end of the mag.

Garden of Evil—rates first because I'm a sucker for surprise endings.

Peril Orbit—the only one with a new angle. They're getting to be scarce.

Stalemate in Space—intriguing. So intriguing that I'm still not sure I understand what I read. The rest were typical life sustainers of the pros. Very little thought necessary.

If that stuff coming out of the red one's rifle on the cover is death producing, a hero is finally done in.

Sincerely,

ROBERT A. RIVENES

PRaise! PRaise! PRaise!

433 E. Chapin St.,
Cadillac, Mich.

DEAR SIR (ole pal):

The stories, happy to say, in your summer issue were all enjoyable. I shall not comment on them individually, however, as I am probably kind of prejudiced in PLANET's favor because of the original yer sending me. You don't shoot Santa Claus, you know.

However, prejudiced or not, I want to haul off and ray that thing from under a rock, Arthur D. Hall. Take Vizi away from us? Never! I know Vizi is very valuable to me. I am rather busy and have formed the habit of rarely reading a whole ish at a sitting, but buying every ish and looking in the Vizi to find out which stories to read in my unread back numbers.

Without the Vizigraph I would have to read through all the second rate stories myself to pick out the gems. I just haven't got the time. While it is true that you often print the best in STF, you also often print the worst. (Take a note, *Miss Gargoyle: No more pix for Nelson*—Ed.)

Also, the column undoubtedly attracts authors. Authors of fiction are entertainers, whether they like it or not, and entertainers love nothing better than (as Gertrude Stein said when asked what she wanted out of life) "Praise! Praise! Praise!" Without a fan column I doubt if they

would get much of it, and might even take to sending their stories elsewhere where the clapping (and, of course, the booing) is audible.

Hall's backhand slap at the "few rabid fans" was certainly uncalled for. Those same rabid fans are the ones who, like me, never miss an issue of PLANET. Yes, we are those best beloved of editors, the regular readers. We, the rabid fans, are also the future writers of STF. (Witness ex-fan Ray Bradbury, Stan Mullen, etc., etc.) We, the rabid fan, are also a good writer's best press agents with our little fanzines and their free advertising to those people who buy STF mags. Do not underestimate fandom, Mister Hall. His idea that rabid fans are (a) few and (b) monopolizing the Vizi is also false. You may have noticed that those few rabid fans change often. Old fen get tired of writing (but not of reading—such a thing is unheard of) and new fen take their places. The letter I won the prize for was the first I had ever written to a prozine. Ray Ramsay, in the Summer ish, was a regular reader, but that was his first letter. Monopolized by a "chosen few?" Nonsense!

I have six (count 'em, six) more reasons why Vizi should stay and Hall should go to—, but my fingers are getting tired and I think I've made my point. The defense rests.

For the Summer letters, give first to newcomer brain, David Hitchcock Green. You would do well to heed this call for unbiased tales. Set a precedent and run a tale with a Negro hero. Hmmm... Maybe something on music in the far future. For some reason or other, the blacks always have been the pioneers and originators in music forms. Maybe because that is one of the few fields in which they can win lasting fame, not only with their own race, but with the whole world.

Second to John Higgins. At the New York World's Fair they had a super-sexy semi-nude statue over an electronics building door labeled "Girl of the Future." I can hardly wait.

Elizabeth Curtis gets third for a fine insight into human nature. And that is that.

Yerz,

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DEAR PARASITE:

Double-spaced, one side only, and just two pages. O.K.? Well, from reading other issues of PS (I've been reading PS for some odd years now—in fact the more I think of it, those *were* odd years) I note that the usual way of opening the epistle is a description of the getting of PS. To wit:

I walked down to the newsstand. I enter newsstand. Woman turns about and sees me. Turns pale. "Do you want IT?" she inquires. I repress shudder. "Yes" says me. I turn my back. She reaches under counter. Emerges, adjusting to her face a large pair of dark colored glasses. She then ties on a rubberoid apron. Applying plastic gloves she opens the said box with a pair of tongs. I now back slowly to counter with hand extended behind me. False

arm of course, I actually touched one of them once. I take magazine and run home.

What's this? That cover's actually good, except perhaps that that four-legged object our heroine is seated on is a bit cross-eyed. By the way, what's the matter with Anderson; the femme actually is clad! Tell me, why is the hero baring his teeth? Does he want to bite the thing that's apparently stabbing him with an icicle? Oh, well, as I was saying—by the way, I was saying something, wasn't I? Oh, well, to continue . . .

Brackett wrote a fair novel this time, except that it might just as easily taken place on Death Valley. (*Sinharati*—Ed.)

The Starbusts and Stalemate in Space were both about average for PS. Also *SOS Aphrodite* and *The Madcap Metalloids*. I've saved *Peril Orbit and Garden of Evil* for careful thought. The first one stank. Mrs. St. Clair scored with me though for her bit. At first it seemed as if it were going to be boring, but it ended up O.K. In fact, I might even go so far as to say to encourage her to do more such works as this.

Why no Bradbury? Why don't you get him to do some more satires for you such as *The Irritated People*? My favorite. Then, of course, comes *Zero Hour*. Oh, vell. (*Hear what de man say, Ray?*—Ed.)

As to page fifty-nine, let's keep La Vizi. This is the first letter I've had printed in PS, you know (HINT), and I certainly wouldn't want it to be the last. Originals? David M. Campbell, Ed Cox (friend of myne, you know), and David Hitchcock Green. He's the first sensible writer in La Vizi I've seen in a long time.

Oh, yes, I vote for more editorial comment in the reader's section. It gets sort of tiring to read all those unanswered questions.

Well, put put . . .

A rather mad fan,

PHIL WAGGÖNER

ALMOST SAYS

119 Ward Road,
North Tonawanda, N. Y.

DEAR PLP:

"Let us know what you think," you said. That's what you said! So don't blame me . . .

I wrote one other letter, that got squeezed out. 'Til now I couldn't bring myself to write another—feeling that it was useless; that I can't compete with the very best . . . that's what you have in the Vizi, you know, the very best. KEEP LA VIZI! There. I said it. . .

About the stories . . . I read Mrs. St. Clair's *Garden of Evil*. I saw something familiar about it, and searched through a mass of books. Have you ever read *The Price of the Head* by John Russell? Evidently Margaret St. Clair has. Read it. It is well written . . . which is just about the only difference in main plot between the two, for *Garden of Evil* nauseated me. Maybe Mrs. St. Clair had better try writing love stories for a change . . .

By far the best was Leigh Brackett's novel. Since her return to STF I have read, I think, either two or three other novels by her. Now I can see the cause of all that praise that she



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received from fans of your magazine, and of * * * * (I did it for you!).

Madcap Metalloids was cute, and *Peril Orbit* was impossible; IT COULD NOT HAPPEN, AND A STORY, TO BE A GOOD SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL, MUST BE AT LEAST REMOTELY POSSIBLE. I liked it, however, but do not want a steady diet of these type.

The novelettes were just a bit below average, and *SOS Aphrodite* is beyond rating. In spots it was superb and in others merely mediocre.

Getting back to the Vizi (and surely, PLP, you can do better than PLANET'S LITTLE PARASITE?), Ray Ramsey, pick one (for his ideas about Anglo-Saxon heroes); David Campbell, grabs no. 2 spot (for all that beeee-ootiful hack); and David Hitchcock Green take last (for the same reason as no. 1, only since you put it in a slightly more obscure way, and with too much verbiage).

Arthur D. Hall got picked. (If anybody's got a flock of pet vultures, or something, there's a suggestion . . .)

Hail! Ohkevixi?! TDCUAIN! Saluti Domini! Per Aspera ad Astra!!!

Paynefully,

W. PAUL GANLEY

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DEAR EDITOR:

Consciousness returned slowly, and with infinite pain. A random thought impinged upon the focal point of identity. "It's been a long time," it said coldly, "a mighty long time." I wondered what it meant, and was attempting to move the focal point after it when a second thought impinged. It was far different than the first, and it was preceded by a definite pain impression. It whimpered: "That sky, Oh Lord, that yellow, yellow, sky." Then it burst like a soap bubble. Was there a connection between them? There must be . . . there was! Like an atomic bomb the point of identity flared and expanded, and before it chaos ceased to exist, and a thousand thousand neural blockages, the only points of resistance, flamed into incandescence and vanished. There was but one further matter to settle. What year was it?

Now that I was again in command of my body, things started to happen. Orders crept along neurotubes clogged with cons of disuse, and the most vital of the bodily functions were resumed. Finally I completed the intricate ocular-cerebral hook up, and stood erect. The automatic calendar on the wall of my air-tight inner sanctum read: A.D. 200,975,163, March 1, Wednesday. It had been a long time.

Then I noticed something for the first time. Lying on the table were two copies of PS, both Summer '49, one of which had had its cover ripped off. Beside it was a typewritten sheet of paper. Matters suddenly became painfully clear. I copied the letter below, for the paper it was on was exceedingly friable. It is as follows.

Dear Editor: (It began.)

Today I received the Summer Ish of Planet Stories; it came by mail and I was surprised to

see that it had no cover. Now see here . . . (There follows a half page of blah not worth repeating.) . . . and so we come to the stories. (It continues.)

Queen Of The Martian Catacombs, by Leigh Brackett. Excellent. The story of how a strong man rubs out one of the two women whom he seems to be interested in, and then the other one tells him to go peddle his apples. A superb ending. (At points this letter gets positively asinine.)

The Starbusters, by Alfred Coppel, Jr. Most unusual, a sciencefiction story based on science. Very good.

Stalemate In Space, by C. L. Harness. The only thing that held my intellectual interest was the chess game. P-K4, P-K3, 2 P-Q4, P-Q3? I wonder WHY? Fair. (Egad, was that intended for a comment? A idiot could do better yet.)

The Madcap Metalloids, by W. V. Athanas. (There was a lot of dull comment here which I mercifully eliminated, to the effect that there ain't no such animal. Don't believe it! I skrenned one ginchin on the surface a few telongs ago.) Pretty good otherwise, tho'.

SOS Aphrodite, by Stanley Mullen. It's amazing how fast the authors catch on; an issue or two ago Gerda would have nabbed Coran (I wonder what I was talking about?) right off the bat, now at least he can go down in mad flight. (Could this be me?) Well done all around.

Peril Orbit, by C. J. Wedlake. A good idea poorly handled equals a mediocre story. (Nice, crisp concise comment.) N.F.C.

GARDEN OF EVIL (note the capitals), by Mrs. S. Clair. This is the best story in the whole issue. Well written, well plotted, its ending makes it stand on end. If it had ended conventionally, it would have been a washout. (There was so much more of this along the same line that I reread the story. It's pretty good, especially the picture.) As it is it's neat.

(There follows a lot of jabber about why The Vizigraph should not be cut off, a remark about diversionary action, and a vote for its continuance.)

In conclusion I wish to vote pics to J. Higgins, D. H. Green, and A. A. Gill—did you say there was a rule against that? A. D. Hall, instead. Say, the postman has just come up with a package that looks like another Summer Ish. It is!! THE COVRX 5-3%\$. . .

I picked up the second magazine me refers to and tore off the cover. Then I neatly chronokinesthetized it back to myself in 1949 and proceeded to the next stercron.

Yours truly,

A. A. GILLILAND

RED WITCH STIRS BREW

R. R. 3,
Freeport, Illinois

DEAR EDITOR:

Whilst thoughtfully nibbling on a left-over olive . . . Something could be murmured to the effect that it was left over from last nite's martini . . . only I don't like martinis. So—as I was saying, whilst thoughtfully nibbling on said olive, I was greeted by the announcement on page 59

What is this?, I sez, between whoops and strangling noises. The olive, of course! This sacrilege that blares forth from page 59. Sacrilege . . . "The violation of anything held sacred." Courtesy of "American College Dictionary." Does not that word fit the Vizigraph? Is it not held sacred by hundreds? Nay, thousands. Why quibble? Millions!

Take me. Oh, you won't? We'll take that up in a later letter, suh. Where else can a lady enjoy a good literary brawl and still remain a lady? Where else can she indulge in the wildest flights of fancy? Take down her hair, kick off her shoes, and really dish it out to all and sundry? Not to mention, getting dished, too. We will quietly ignore those past episodes. There are postal laws. So I've heard.

Abolish the ads. Abolish the stories. Abolish the covers. But keep the Vizigraph. Where would Damon be without Pythias? Antony without Cleopatra? Ham without eggs? Grable without cheesecake? PLANET without La Vizi? Many and many a weary issue, the Vizi was the only thing in the darn mag worth tossing down the required coin.

Here is one fevered and fervent vote for keeping it! Ignore the lowbrowed, ignorant barbarians that wish to see it tossed aside as worthless. Those low grade intellectuals who would spurn its hallowed pages. We, the true intellectuals, (who's talkin'-you? Yes, Me!) the people that count, speak! We who appreciate at their true worth those glowing gems of wit, wisdom, and how to influence Centaurs that sparkle from its pages.

It has only been a galactic disaster of such magnitude as this one that could have brought me out of my self-chosen hibernation. Weigh these words carefully, Ruler of Destinies. I have spoken!

VIRGINIA L. SHAWL

The one and only Red Witch
Accept no substitutes

OL' WESTBROOK SIGLER

1028 N. Broadway,
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

Since you want to know what the readers think of the Vizigraph I would like to have my say. I want to keep the large size as it is the best part of the magazine. I have derived more entertainment from the bright remarks, concerning me, made by the other readers than I generally derive from the stories themselves.

If you cut out the Vizigraph you will remove the best part of the magazine, as most of your stories aren't enough to cheer about. In the last issue there were only two stories that were any good. One was the pilot lost near the sun. I especially like the way he was pictured as making notations in his log when he figured nobody would ever see them. However, it would have been more practical to have said that it was steam pressure acting as a rocket jet that did the work, for that is what it really was.

The second story was of that drug addict being cured by that savage girl just so she could offer him as a sacrifice to her pagan dieties. What amuses me was how you dared to print

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it. I'd be almost willing to accuse you and the author of attempting to spread race prejudice, etc., pro longo et mucho. Yet any capable scientist could tell you that such action took place among many different people on Earth, including such a comparatively high race as the Aztecs.

As to Leigh Brackett's stories, they just don't sound natural. The very fact that she insists on sticking naked dames in a story robs it of all effectiveness. A woman under certain circumstances will display her body, but you can't make me believe that a woman will deliberately run around naked in weather as cold as it is supposed to be on Mars. There is a limit to human endurance as anyone knows. Miss Brackett could improve her stories to a large degree if she would only exercise better judgment in her writing.

As to that person's complaint about people criticizing and that the authors do their best, I have a different opinion. As long as I am expected to pay for a magazine I intend to have my say about their quality. I am particularly irked by writers making the basis of their stories absolutely contrary to known facts and mis-using scientific terms.

If an author is too lazy to spend five minutes consulting a dictionary or an encyclopedia, why purchase his story? If a person were to write a story of ancient Rome and then put Rome in California in 1949, no editor would purchase it as it would be too silly. Why should science-fiction be immune?

EDWIN SIGLER

WANTS A McWILLIAMS

4 Spring Street,
Lubec, Maine

DEAR EDITOR:

First, let me vote YES, keep the Vizigraph. A magazine with no letter column seems to lack life and spark. The letters show an interest in the magazine that is live and active which is easily shown by the letters to other mags other than PS (to take care of anyone who says fans write to PLANET only for a chance at originals) . . .

All the stories were satisfactory this time. It used to be that we could crab about at least two or three but no more. Especially liked were Leigh Brackett's long story, Stan Mullen's second PStory and Charles Harness' first PStory (unless he has already got a pen-name). Margaret St. Clair turned out her best to date. Illustrations were tops by McWilliams. It is my ambition to get an original by him some year. So, if for only that, the fans better vote to keep La Vizi cause how can I write letters in hopes of getting a McWilliams if there just ain't no lettersexshun? I'd write even if there were no pic-prizes though. But gaze on that pic on page 37. Ahhhhhh . . .

First place, in my opinion, goes to John Higgins for an intelligent and well-presented letter on a delicate subject. Just keep the sex-content the way it is now and we all should be about satisfied. David Hitchcock Green gets second place for an equally good letter. I don't entirely agree with him but don't dare take up room here to discuss his letter. Elizabeth Curtis

gets third for a nice letter and for another reason which is obvious!

I liked the feature on page 75. Whose idea was this? Yours? And the artist? Keep things like this coming.

And, for once, I'm actually ending the letter with comment on the cover (instead of either completely ignoring it or panning it at the beginning of my letter); It was punk. Anderson has done an awful lot better. This looked rushed . . .

That's just about all. In fact, it is all!

STFanatically,

Ed Cox

WANTS TO SEE HALL'S LICENSE

DEAR EDITOR:

Box 608,
Boone, N. C.

I'm writing in connection with the voting on whether or not to continue the Vizi. I definitely think you should; it's a very good feature; in fact, it's better than the stories most of the time. The mag just wouldn't be the same without it.

Here are a few comments on the letters. Arthur Hall, you're no fan! PLANET just wouldn't be a STF mag without the letters; I'll admit that the letters are boring if they are just a comment on the stories but most of the time that isn't all. The letters are definitely of public interest (those that do something other than gripe about the stories) because all fans are interested in what the others have to say. I'd like to know if you just read STF to be reading or if you claim to be a fan; are you a member of any fan club? Even those letters that are just gripes about the stories are interesting because all fans are interested in knowing what the others think.

Ray Ramsay, you have a point there; I've never thought much about it before but most heroes are American or at least Anglo-Saxon. Why doesn't dear old PS run a story with a Chinese hero or something? (Or an editor-hero . . . yuk—Ed.)

John Higgins, I agree with you; sex needs more serious consideration and STF is the first place it should happen. I think it should be here now instead of coming in the future.

Mr. Payne, why don't you print the names of your competitors when some fan mentions them? I don't see that it would hurt anything. It seems like childish jealousy to me. (What competitors? —Ed.)

Now I'll rate the stories and then quit 'cause I don't have all day to write this. *Queen of the Martian Catacombs*; Brackett can do better than this. *Starbustlers*; could be better but could also be worse, about an average yarn. *Stalemate in Space*; I couldn't figure out that time travel angle; I'll have to reread it. *Madcap Metalloids*; best story in the mag. *SOS Aphrodite*; gad! another mystery. *Peril Orbit*; second best story. *Garden of Evil*; I was surprised at the ending; I expected them to fall in love and live happily ever after.

Well, I'll quit for now; if by any chance I get this printed I'll write a longer letter next time. If I don't get it printed, I'll still write a longer one next time; I don't leave you much choice, do I?

Adieu,

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Chevy Chase, Md.

I vote—keep the Vizigraph. To my mind the personalized touch it adds to the magazine is priceless. And (suggestion), if really worthwhile gems are accumulating, the obvious solution is either a bimonthly or an enlarged quarterly!

—GILBERT L. GIBSON

Buffalo, N. Y.

Of course, we would rather have an extra story in the space taken up by the Vizigraph. But what's the use of telling you? The small group of readers who want to see their names in print have a stronger incentive for writing in than the larger, but more apathetic, group of "just readers," and your poll will therefore not give a true picture.

—MRS. PETER CONOVER

Moorhead, Minn.

Don't you dare leave out the Vizigraph! 90% of the fan-readers turn to it first; then they read the stories. Let the others yell . . . when no one complains, it's time to stop the presses.

—K. MARTIN CARLSON
(National Fantasy Fan Federation)

Detroit, Mich.

I most assuredly would like to see more stories in place of the Vizigraph. Once in a while I read part of it, but it is my honest opinion that most of the people who write that drivel are the type that always pan their neighbors and anyone else they come in contact with . . .

—M. A. ALVA

Carbondale, Ill.

Keep the Vizigraph, but how about . . . a page for facts that need to be presented in answer to questions that come up from time to time in readers' letters?

—FRANK F. GROVES

Flushing, N. Y.

I agree thoroughly with Mr. Hall. Let the rabid vizigraphers converse with each other in the fan mags. The stories are Okay and don't need their sometimes vindictive criticism . . .

—EARL DAVIS

New York City

By all means, keep the Vizigraph . . . but please don't let PS develop into a private feuding ground for a few rabid fans . . .

—E. McMANN

Louisville, Ky.

My vote is for ANOTHER STORY. I can get letters from my friends and not pay for them . . .

ED BAUER

Ridgway, Ill.

By all means, keep the Vizigraph. I doubt if I shall ever patronize it, but . . . it makes very good reading.

—GEORGE D. MILLS

Dover, N. J.

I agree 100% with Arthur Hall . . . The Vizigraph is, to me, just a lousy feature with a lot of small talk, in which no one accomplishes anything . . .

—DICK FLOYD

Stanford, Cal.

Keep the Vizigraph! It's more fun than any two stories combined, and the only part of the magazine I *always* read.

—J. E. HOLMES

Logan, Utah

Concerning the Vizigraph, I think that it is a good idea and that it should be continued. However, it is my opinion that it should be shortened so that an extra story can be worked in . . .

—SPENST HANSEN

Hang on to the Vizigraph!

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Pawtucket, R. I.

You're a laugh. Your hah poll unquote is as phony as those we showed up last November. Who are you trying to kid?

—HERBERT SNEDECKER

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IN CLOSET319 Fair Avenue,
Gainesville, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

No! A thousand times no! Don't cut out the Vizigraph! Increase it! PLANET STORIES without the Vizigraph would be like a fish without water. Anyway, it improved immensely this time. Not so many "black vs. white" letters as in previous issues.

Ed Cox brought up a point which I'd like to stress further. Any fan who has read STF for a reasonable period of time naturally has favorite authors whom he would like to see in PS. Some have appeared before in your pages a long time ago. Unfortunately, most of them, the ones who made PS the leader in the field during the early and middle forties have either totally disappeared or have taken their work elsewhere. Henry Kuttner, for example. A few have returned to the fold. Brackett and Hasse are two examples. Before Leigh returned, her last story for PS was *Lorelei of the Red Mist* which she wrote in collaboration with Ray Bradbury back in the summer of 1946. The last story she wrote by herself was *The Vanishing Venusians* which appeared way back in Spring, 1945. Hasse's last story before he returned was *Final Glory*. It was published in Spring, 1947.

And now Ed Cox asks, "Where is Albert DePina?" Well, where is he? (*Hey, Al, where are you?*—Ed.)

All of which brings me to this point. Why not take a poll of authors wanted and those not wanted by the fans? This would be something good for the Vizigraph, if nothing else. We would have fun for a few issues.

You could make an effort to contact these writers and if you can't get them to submit something—well, you just can't. But if you can't, let us know and we'll stop squawking. Personally, I'll bet there are a few good yarns left in some of the old timers. (*Keep right on squawking. Maybe some of them will hear you and realize ole PS is as ready as ever to run their stuff.*—Ed.)

I'll start the ball rolling with a list of good authors that I haven't seen in PLANET in quite a while, authors who really know how to write! I'll bet fans will agree that if a lineup appeared with just a few of the following, you would have a banner issue. Here they are:

Henry Kuttner, Albert DePina, Ray Cummings, Emmett McDowell, Carl Selwyn, Gardner F. Fox, Bryce Walton (in novel form), Raymond F. Jones, Chester S. Geier, Ross Rocklynne, Clifford D. Simak, Frederic Brown, Raymond Z. Gallun, Isaac Asimov, Manly Wade Wellman, Eando Binder, Nelson S. Bond, Ed Earl Repp, Charles R. Tanner, Neil R. Jones, and John Russell Fearn.

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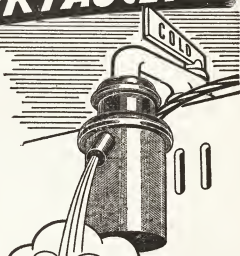
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